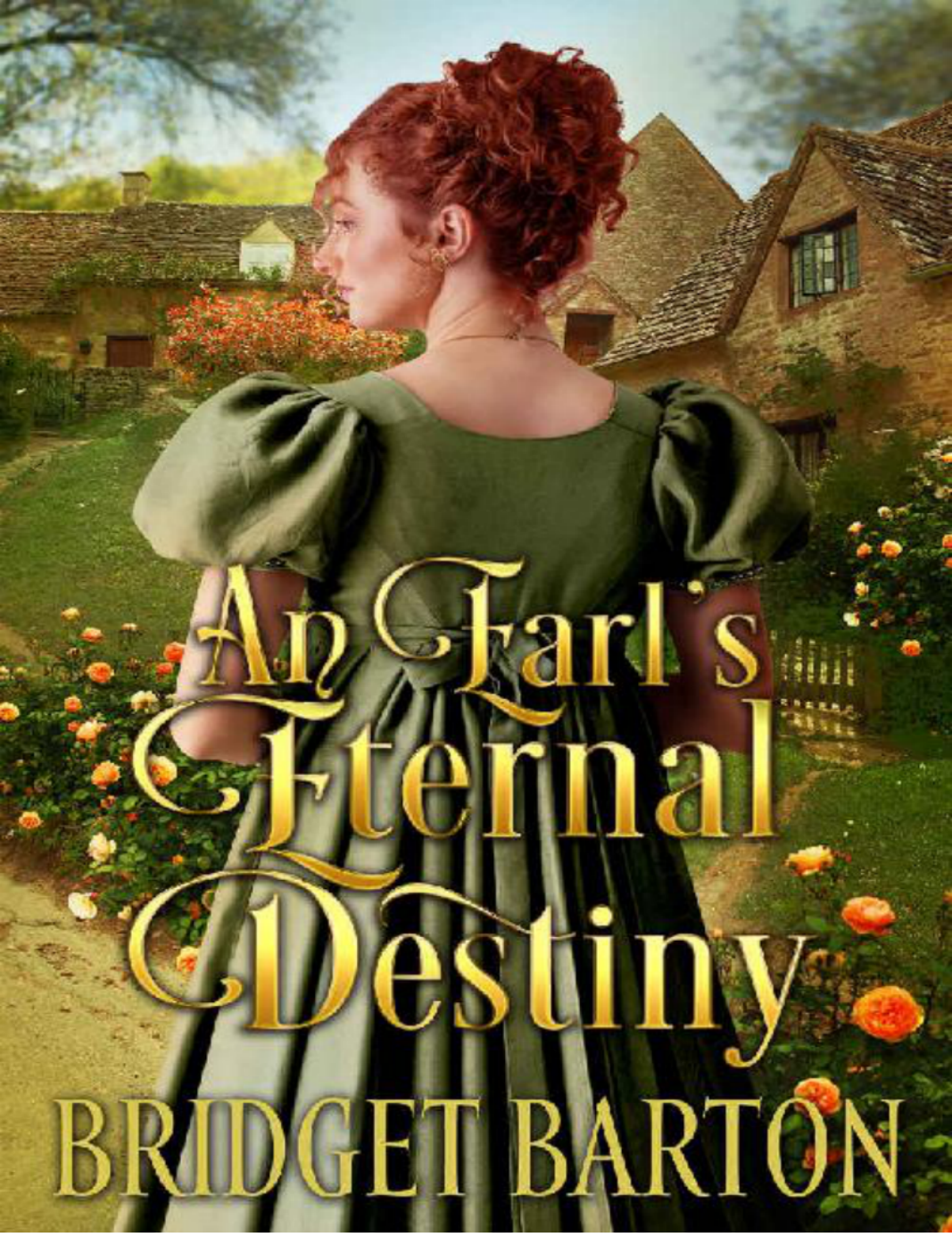

An Earl's
Eternal
Destiny
BRIDGET BARTON

An Earl's Eternal Destiny

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

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Website: Bridget Barton

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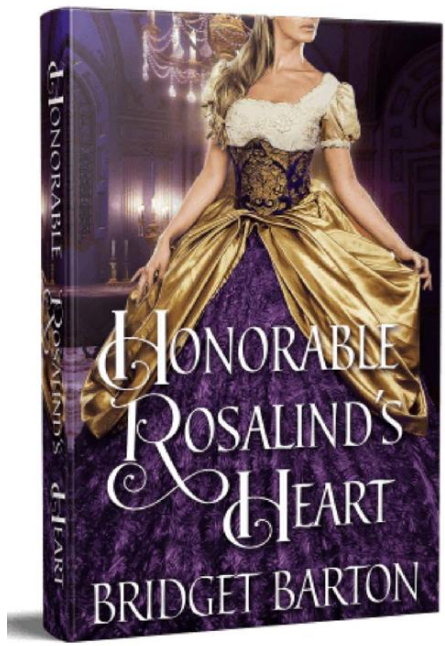
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An Earl's Eternal Destiny

Introduction

Following an unfortunate event that compromised her reputation, Sarah Kingston was forced to retreat to a small seaside town. When Henry Stewart, the Earl of Lakefield and the man she once loved, comes back to her life, Sarah struggles to deal with what is in her heart.

Even though she feels the spark still burning for him, she knows better than anyone that nothing could change the past. Will Sarah find the strength to go against the odds and change her ill fate?

A broken heart and a righteous Earl...

After Sarah ran away from him two years ago, Henry decided to live in solitude, until the day he crossed paths with her again. From that moment on, he cannot stop daydreaming about his old love, but his deep scars do not let him trust her again that easily. To make matters worse, he knows that a relationship with her would tarnish his status forever. Will Henry be strong enough to turn away from the only woman he has ever loved? Or will he risk it all and give love a second chance?

A love that could never be buried...

As Sarah and Henry's fate brings them together again and again, they

will not only have to face their repressed feelings, but also their past that keeps emerging and reminding them of what they could be. As if this was not enough, a heartless rake will threaten to tear them apart once again. Will Henry save Sarah from the man who scarred her life with his capricious whims? Will the two soulmates defy everyone opposing their love?

Chapter 1

Swanage, Dorset1819

“You definitely cheated!” Lord Hector’s voice followed Henry as they climbed up the hill pass. Together they were riding, well, racing their horses across the track that cut across the green hills, past the cliff edges, and toward the next seaside town.

“I am merely the finer rider,” Henry said in jest, looking over his shoulder to see Lord Hector somewhat struggling with getting his horse up the steep incline. Henry laughed and turned back, facing forward and urging his black steed to canter up the hill. Easily, the horse abided by his wishes, for he was not pushing the animal too hard.

Once he reached the top of the incline he brought the horse to a stop, feeling the wind rushing up the cliff edge and buffeting his face, so that his dark brown hair that normally curled around his ears was strewn behind him.

“I hope the view is worth this ride,” Lord Hector’s complaint came from a little way down the hill.

“You could say that,” Henry chuckled as he caught his breath, looking about himself.

To one side of the hill there werethe steep white chalk cliffs of Old Harry Rocks. The stacks of chalk jutted out into the pearlescent blue ocean, with the waves crashing against the rocks with so much energy that even this high up he could hear the spray of each wave. To his right-hand side, the cliffs dropped away, and a seaside town sat in a bay. In front of the buildings the yellow sand stretched out, with a dockyard and a mini pier nearby. Behind the beach and the promenade were short buildings, renaissance in style with white frontages that the noon-day sun bounced back off.

“It’s worth the climb, believe me.”

Lord Hector appeared at his side, breathing almost as heavily as his poor steed was who hung his nose down to the ground a little.

“You worked the horse too much,” Henry teased, earning a false dark glare from his friend. Lord Hector’s blue eyes narrowed a little before he pushed the coiffed blond hair back on his head and turned his somewhat bulky form to look at the view. Stocky in figure with dense shoulders, Lord Hector had a habit of making a presence in any room he stepped into, even if he was perhaps not the most athletic of figures.

Henry steered his horse closer to his friend’s, comparing the two of them in stature. Whereas Lord Hector was of average height and stocky build, Henry was tall, lithe and slightly broad in shoulders with a narrow waist. Together, the two made quite a comparison.

“Well, you were right, it was worth the view,” Lord Hector said, gesturing to the breathtaking sight before them. Being set so high above the town atop the cliff, Swanage could have been a miniature town built by a modeler for them to peruse, had it not been for the sunshine glinting off the waves that kept crawling up to meet the beach. “I’m not sure it was worth losing another race to you though.”

“I’ll tell you what, last race of the day,” Henry said, holding up a figure.

“Oh, must we?” Lord Hector groaned audibly. “Another one?”

“My aunt will be getting lonely in her carriage,” Henry said by way of an explanation. “First one back to her on the main road wins.”

“What do we win?”

“Pride only, my friend.”

“Shame, I was hoping we win something worthwhile, like an ale being purchased when we reach this inn,” Lord Hector said with a shake of his head. “You’ll have to give me a head start.”

“Very well, off you go,” Henry said, gesturing for Lord Hector to take the lead. As he descended the green bank, moving toward the road that was far to their right-hand side and cambered down the hill, Henry counted just three seconds before he urged his steed forward.

Within a few strides, he had overtaken his friend, much to Lord Hector’s complaint, who happily jested by throwing supposed insults after Henry as he passed him.

“You’ll just have to practice riding more,” Henry said as he overtook his friend.

“What do you think I am doing right now!?” Lord Hector’s words made Henry laugh before he turned the steed onto the road, pulling the reins high up into his hand so that the black steed whinnied in delight. With ease, he pulled up alongside the carriage that was bumbling along across the track.

Ordinarily pale wood in color and painted with white detailing, it was a fine carriage, yet today it was covered in a lot of dirt from their journey across the countryside, in order to be far away from London.

“Have one of you fallen off the cliffs yet?” The familiar voice made Henry slow down the horse to walk alongside the ambling carriage just as a white lace curtain was lifted from the window and a face peered beyond.

“Not yet,” Henry said, teasing his aunt who offered him a despairing shake of her head in reply. Lady Catherine Lamptonshire had always been an impressive sight to behold. Henry could remember even from when he was young how his aunt commanded attention in any room. She not only commanded attention, but good behavior and bending to her will too. As a boy, if she told him off, he would always apologize profusely for what he had done, fearful of those large cinnamon-colored eyes narrowing on him. “It is perfectly safe, Aunt,” he said with a soft chuckle.

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you had fallen to the bottom of the cliff.” She harrumphed with the words and sat back a little. From the view he had of her, the sunlight was seeping a little more into the carriage window now, lighting her features.

The once striking face was now creasing with age, though the smile was almost still always present. After the death of her husband, the Marchioness of Lamptonshire, that smile had not always been seen so often. These days though, the smile was back and the lines in her face betrayed the many years she’d had laughing and smiling, with a good life. Her grey hair that had once been as brown as his own was coiffed perfectly up at the back of her head, and she attended to it now, fussing with it, clearly frustrated at the wind that blew in threw the window, threatening to destroy the updo.

“No more racing, Henry,” she said as an order. “We are nearly there.”

“Why are we stopping in this town again?” he asked, his brow furrowing as he turned his gaze forward to the road up ahead. “I have never even heard of it before. It hardly seems a direct route to Exeter anyway.”

“I wish to see the place again. The last time I was here I was your age,” she said with a smile. There was something to that smile, something that suggested there was more behind her sentence, but Henry didn’t have chance to ask what it was, for she was speaking again. “I shall be glad to see it, and we only intend to stay a little while at the inn before we move on. I shall not have interrupted yours and Lord Hector’s hunting party for too long.”

“Do not worry about that,” Henry assured her, just as Lord Hector appeared on his other side.

“It’s not the shooting I am worried about, it is my betrothed,” Lord Hector pointed out, prompting Henry to chuckle softly.

“You have only just become betrothed; you are not even married yet. Will she really be so angry at you if you are a little late?”

“You have met Dianne, haven’t you?” Lord Hector said and affected a shudder, as though afeared of her. “Believe me, no one wants to get into an argument with that lady.”

“I hope every man fears arguing with their wife the way you do, Lord Hector,” Catherine said from inside the carriage. “We women would win more arguments then.”

“When is it your time to argue with a wife then, Lord Lakefield?” Lord Hector addressed Henry. At once, he felt the familiar tightening in his chest. It was the sensation that he always endured whenever anyone asked him such a question.

“I am a confirmed bachelor, as you well know,” Henry said, losing his laughter as he stared forward at the road ahead.

“But who will give me great nieces and nephews?” Catherine’s voice prompted him to turn back to look at the carriage. “I cannot have grandchildren, so it must be great nieces and nephews instead.” Unable to have children with her own husband, Henry was not

oblivious to the hope that his aunt had placed on his shoulders to produce little ones. As much as he liked to see her happy, it was a promise he would never fulfill.

“My apologies, Aunt, but I never intend to marry and therefore children are not possible.” He spoke nonchalantly, knowing they’d had this conversation more than once before. Catherine huffed before she lowered the white curtain back down over the window, clearly ending the conversation with a little irritation.

Lord Hector’s soft laugh urged Henry to turn back to him.

“I love the way your aunt can show how upset she is without any need for words.”

“As do I,” Henry said, smiling a little.

“So, tell me again why.”

“Why what?”

“Why is it you will never marry?” Lord Hector said, gesturing to him.

“Look at you. Betrothed barely two weeks and you already think you know the perfect recipe for happiness,” Henry said, pointing at his friend.

“Well, do I not look happy?”

“Sickeningly so!” Henry joked.

“Then you have your answer. So, give me my answer. Why will you never marry?”

Henry looked away from his friend and down at the road ahead, hating having this conversation. In some ways, it had felt so long ago, though in reality two years was not an awfully long time.

“Consider me tainted,” Henry said succinctly, hoping this went someway to explaining his problem. “I entertained the idea of marriage once and I will not make the mistake again.”

“I can’t help but wonder what the lady was like.”

“What lady?”

“The one that evidently broke your heart.”

“Let’s not discuss this anymore,” Henry said, sitting higher in his saddle. He was tired of this conversation and desperate to begin something new. “Last one into town buys the ales at the inn, what do you say?”

“You have yourself a deal!”

“It seems to be going well,” Sarah said as she sipped from her teacup and looked around the room. The cottage she and her mother lived in now was hardly a grand affair, though it had a beautiful view over the ocean and the town bay, that made it highly desirable indeed. In their small drawing room, their guests were dotted around, each one smiling and drinking together.

“That it does,” her mother said, sighing at her side.

“Oh dear, that was a sigh and a half,” Sarah said, smiling at her mother in jest. “For what reason could you be sighing so when we have guests, tea to drink, and the best carrot cake our cook has ever made?” Her mother smiled too before turning a little away from their guests and lifting her teacup higher to hide her lips as she spoke.

“I like our friends here, I truly do,” Anne said gently, “but I miss my old friends too. I cannot wait to someday be back at Brookshire –”

“Mama, no,” Sarah spoke sharply, losing all temptation to jest and occupy herself with light conversation. She placed the teacup down in the saucer in her grasp and turned her body away fromtheir guests too. “You know we can never go back there.”

“But…time has passed,” Anne said, looking hopeful. Sarah could see her mother was beginning to ail a little as she aged. As kind and as optimistic as she had always been, every now and then there was a forgetfulness to her now. More than once did Sarah have to remind her of things, sometimes big things, like why they had come to Swanage at all, and sometimes small things, like she hadn’t lost her spectacles at all, for they were on her head.

“Time does not matter, Mama,” Sarah assured her softly. “People have long memories, and their love of gossip will never fade. We cannot go back to Brookshire.”

Anne’s red lips pursed together in disappointment. Sarah had inherited the trait and found herself biting her own red lips, saddened to cause her mother any pain.

“What is wrong with Brookshire?” the familiar voice made Sarah wince a little. She turned slowly to see her friend, Miss Rebecca Hampshire, standing nearby. Her strawberry blonde hair had wisps that were falling out of her updo, and her freckled cheeks were spread into a smile, clearly intrigued as to what she had heard. “You said you cannot go back to Brookshire, whatever for?”

“Yes, why can’t we go back?” Anne asked. Sarah’s heart sank as her mother had clearly forgotten the reason again.

“It does not matter now,” Sarah said, affecting a smile she could not feel. “Mama, go sit with the Miss Tilneys, they have been dying to ask us about the recipe for our carrot cake all day.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Anne said and tottered off on her slim heels, heading straight for where the two Miss Tilney sisters were sat together on a divan, fighting over the carrot cake.

“I was about to ask how your mother is today, but I think I just saw a little of how she is doing,” Rebecca said gently as she tapped Sarah’s arm and moved to stand beside her so the two of them could look out over the room of ladies together.

“Some days are better than others,” Sarah said, trying to pretend it didn’t hurt as much as it did. “As long as she is happy, that is what matters to me.” She lifted the teacup back to her lips, trying to busy herself with drinking.

“Of course.What did she mean when she was speaking of Brookshire?” Rebecca asked. Sarah was so startled by the topic being brought up again that she choked on the tea. She coughed heartily as her friend patted her back, helping to clear her airways. “Good lord, you’d think I’d said something awful.”

“You might as well have done,” Sarah mumbled to herself.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Sarah lied and lifted her eyes to her friend once more.

“Why can’t you go back to Brookshire, Sarah?” Rebecca said, pursuing the matter even more.

“It hardly matters,” Sarah said, placing the teacup down on the sideboard. “I think some fresh air would do me some good today. The sun is shining, and the sea is practically glistening, what do you say we take a walk together after tea?”

“I would love that,” Rebecca said, “if you tell me why you cannot return to Brookshire?”

Sarah looked at her friend, seeing the keenness of Rebecca’s hazel eyes she knew she would not be able to escape this conversation forever. Rebecca’s friendship mattered more to Sarah than any other these days, so she hadn’t told Rebecca the truth of her past, for she feared it could damage that friendship. Yet clearly Rebecca was not going to give up. Sarah had to find a way to satisfy her friend with an answer and close down the conversation for good.

“My heart broke once whilst I was living there. I cannot risk it breaking again by going back.” Her words had achieved her aim. Rebecca was saddened and placed her teacup down too.

“For that, I am sorrier than I can say. Let me apologize to you for pressuring to tell me by going on that walk.” Rebecca took her hand and began to lead her toward the door. Sarah appreciated the kindness, yet the damage was already done.

By Brookshire being mentioned, the heartache she sought to ignore every day for the last two years was back again. It was as though someone had laid a wound to her chest and left it open, bleeding, unable to heal.

Chapter 2

“What an odd place to stop,” Lord Hector said at Henry’s side as they followed the carriage through the town. Henry had once again won their race and then waited for both Lord Hector and the carriage to catch up. They were now riding behind the carriage, looking about at the promenade on one side and the Palladian-style buildings on the other. “It’s a quiet place. Why did your aunt wish to stay here again?”

“She just said she had been here before,” Henry said, though he had to agree with Lord Hector. It was a quiet place and so far off the beaten track, he found it hard to understand why his aunt had ever been here before.

“There are barely any people out! Are they all hiding indoors?”

“In this heat, could you blame them?” Henry gestured to the sun above them. There was not a cloud in the sky today and though he had already thrown off his jacket, looping it through the reins of the horse, and rolled up his shirt sleeves, it had done little to abate the heat. He pulled at the cravat around his throat instead, desperate for some relief.

His eyes danced about the few people that were wandering up and down the promenade. There were some working gentlemen, clearly hurrying to their business, a group of ladies too, two couples walking together, and two ladies walking alone, arm in arm. One of the ladies caught Henry’s eye.

It was the hair. He had known someone with such striking dark auburn hair once. He could remember vividly stealing a moment alone with her, away from their chaperone and curling one of the locks of auburn hair around his fingers. It had been an intoxicating moment with one stolen and brief kiss. It was a treasured memory, even if it was a thing that he could never relive.

The lady before him turned a little as he moved down the street, following the carriage and drawing more level with her. He couldn’t yet see her face, but he could see the way she moved clearly. There was something familiar in it too, right down to the way she brushed a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. He had seen the lady from his past do such a thing many a time. Then she laughed, the tinkling sound was melodic, the exact same sound he could remember.

“It can’t be,” he muttered, bringing the horse to a sharp stop. He couldn’t dare hope it was her. She had practically disappeared off the face of the earth, refusing to see him ever again, could she really be hiding in such a seaside town as this?

Then she turned her head slightly, speaking to the lady who she had looped arms with, and revealed her face for him to see.

“God’s wounds…” he muttered, tensing up on the horse and pulling on the reins. *It is her.*

Miss Sarah Kingston was standing a short distance away from him on the promenade. She had grown up a little more, grown in height and her high cheekbones were even more noticeable than they had been before, but there could be no mistaking her identity. She bore the same bold green eyes, sharp and sometimes piercing. The nose sloped down in the way he remembered clearly, and her red lips, not quite as red as her hair, were parted in laughter. He could remember placing that stolen kiss to those lips, loving each second of it.

He tensed up so much on the horse that the steed became restless. It whinnied loudly into the air.

Henry was startled by the sound and pulled at the reins, looking round himself enough to see the whinny had caught Lord Hector’s attention and was riding back toward him.

“Is all well?” he asked with evident concern.

Henry couldn’t answer. His heartbeat was thudding so loud that he could hear it echoing in his ears. His palms were clammy too, not because of the heat of the day, but because he was struggling to believe the proof of his own eyes. Rather than answer Lord Hector at all, he turned his head back to see Miss Kingston.

She looked up from her friend, apparently having heard the whinny of the horse too, and she looked straight at him. He didn’t move. It had been two years since he had last seen her, two years since she had quite literally run away from him. He wanted to see what she would do next.

She backed up. She clutched at her friend’s hand and drew her back with her, so close to the edge of the promenade that she was in danger

of falling onto the beach a fair few feet below her. Henry felt a leap in his chest, concerned for her safety, but her friend was not going to let it happen. Her friend tugged Miss Kingston away from the precipice, back onto the main part of the promenade.

Miss Kingston glanced her friend's way and said something hurriedly before turning her eyes back to Henry again.

She backed up from me.

He felt the same pain that he had suffered when she had run from him at that ball. Unable to keep suffering it, he looked away. He did not nod his head to her, bow above his horse, or acknowledge her presence in anyway, he couldn't out of fear of how she would react. Instead, he grabbed the reins of the horse and urged them forward, until he caught up with Lord Hector. Together, they raced after the carriage, eagerly catching up to it.

"What was that about?" Lord Hector said as they came to a trot behind the carriage once more. "Who was that lady you were staring at?"

"I wasn't staring," Henry said quickly, fidgeting in his saddle.

"Really? You've stared for less time down the barrel of a gun when we go shooting," Lord Hector said with a smirk. Henry's dark glare did nothing to abate that smirk. "Who was that?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter? She seemed in so much shock to see you that she nearly fell off the promenade. That can hardly not matter, can it?"

Henry was so irked by his friend's incessant questions that he found the truth falling from his lips.

"Her name is Miss Sarah Kingston, daughter of Lord and Lady Kingston. Lord Kingston is a lawyer and MP. Well, he was, up until two years ago, when the family…they retreated from London." He sought to explain himself as quickly as possible. One glance at Lord Hector showed the fair eyebrows were arched in curiosity.

"None of that explains why you were staring at her so intently."

Frustrated, Henry moved his horse closer to his friend's, enabling him to whisper quietly, in case any passersby in the street could hear them.

"You wished to know a few minutes ago who had spoiled my idea of marriage?" he said, watching as Lord Hector's mouth parted in surprise.

"Ah…Miss Kingston would be the reason for it then."

"You could say that, yes," Henry said, looking forward again and trying to fix his gaze upon the carriage, yet he could not focus on it. His mind was elsewhere, thinking of the young woman he had just seen, how she had changed, yet was still very much the lady he remembered. It made him yearn to turn around and ride back to her, something he could never do.

"Well, maybe it was fate you saw her again."

"Fate?" Henry scoffed.

"What? You do not believe in fate?" Lord Hector said with a smile. "I've always quite liked the idea."

"Oh, it's a wonderful idea," Henry said with sarcasm. He despised the thought that all the heartache he had gone through thinking of Miss Kingston had been planned for him, it was just not possible. "Fate is an idea only. It does not exist."

"You cannot know that for sure. What if you have seen her again for a reason? Maybe she'll be pleased to see you?"

"I doubt that," Henry said, scoffing once more though there was no humor in it. "You saw her reaction just now." He didn't need to add what he already knew. She had run from him once before, he didn't want to give her the opportunity to do it again.

"Sarah, cling onto my hand much tighter and you'll snap off my fingers!" Rebecca cried with a yelp of pain.

"Oops, I'm sorry," she said hurriedly and released her friend. She stared after the horse that had just hurried off down the road and the

carriage it followed too. “Rebecca, tell me I imagined that.”

“Imagined what? You nearly falling off the promenade? No, that definitely happened. For one second, I thought I was going to have to run down the steps and pull you out of the sand,” Rebecca said, shaking out her sore fingers.

“No! Not that. *That!*” Sarah pointed down the road at the horse that had left them far behind. “The gentleman on the horse?”

“Which one? The stocky one with the happy face? Or the brown-haired one with the brooding face?”

“The brooding one,” Sarah said before realizing that Rebecca had seen him too. “Oh, good lord, for a minute I thought I was going mad.” She paced up and down the promenade, gripping her red hair to her hair.

“I’d like to reserve judgement for now on whether you are or not,” Rebecca said with a laugh. “What has gotten into you?”

“He’s here. Oh god, I didn’t imagine him, he’s really here.” She turned and took Rebecca’s shoulders, shaking them slightly. “He cannot be here!”

“Well, he is here, whoever he is. Care to tell me who that was before you shake all the stuffing out of me?” Rebecca’s jest made Sarah release her friend and turn back round again.

“He is the Earl of Lakefield, Henry Stewart,” Sarah said, feeling her hands tremble as she turned to look along the road down which he had disappeared.

“An Earl? Oh my. We do not get many dignitaries in this sleepy town. You know an Earl?”

“He wasn’t Earl when I knew him,” Sarah said frantically, unable to settle. She felt all aquiver, with her hands trembling, her lips unable to stay still and her gaze frantically darting up and down. “His father was Earl then, but I read in the papers last year the father had died, so he must be Earl now.”

“And this Earl is important because…?” Rebecca left off clearly hopeful Sarah would fill in the gap.

“Because he cannot be here!” she cried with insistence. “He’s not supposed to find me here, no one is, but least of all him.”

“Right, you’re not making any sense at all, Sarah, but I think it best we take you home now.” Rebecca took her arm and began to lead her off down the promenade.

“Home? What? No,” she said, walking away with Rebecca though she glanced back down the road where Lord Lakefield had gone.

“Where do you want to go? Running after an Earl on his horse?”

“Of course, not. I cannot see him again,” Sarah said quickly.

“Tell that to your feet and make them walk in the same direction as me then, for you are fighting me all the way,” Rebecca’s quip made Sarah realize just what she was doing. It was as though her body had a mind of its own and was indeed trying to extricate itself from Rebecca to follow Lord Lakefield. She gave up and walked alongside Rebecca instead.

They hurried along the promenade. In the heat of the day, the fast pace they set was cloying and practically unbearable, prompting Sarah to pull at her short sleeves, desperate for some relief from the temperature. As they walked, she could feel Rebecca’s gaze repeatedly turning to her with worry.

“You’re shaking like a leaf,” Rebecca said as they climbed off the promenade and began to ascend a short, inclined path, up to where the cottage was set into a hill, overlooking the bay.

“This is bad, Rebecca,” Sarah said, feeling the threat of tears.

“Why is it bad?” Rebecca said with worry. “He seemed to be quite a handsome man. Is he in actual fact a monster?”

“No! No, nothing could be further than the truth,” Sarah said hurriedly as the path levelled out into a road. “He is…” she faltered, unable to say the words aloud. *The best man I have ever known.*

“He is what?”

“I cannot explain it now,” Sarah said, shaking her head. “I need to talk to my mother.”

“Very well, I shall leave you then, though I have to say I hate leaving you in such a state.” Rebecca released her arm as they reached the gate that led up the small path to the cottage. Sarah hurried up it, hovering in the doorway just once to wave at Rebecca who stood beside the view over the sea, waving back at her. “I will come to see you tomorrow,” Rebecca said. “Once you have got over what is clearly a shock!” Despite Rebecca’s jest, Sarah could see the concern and fear in her friend’s eyes.

“Until tomorrow,” Sarah said, trying to smile to reassure her friend, but it felt false and did not last long. She hurried indoors, searching the rooms as quickly as she could. “Mama? Mama!”

She found Anne in the end in the drawing room, helping one of their two maids to clear up the spent teacups and saucers.

“Sarah, what is the matter?” Anne said, about to take one of the seats. Sarah didn’t let her. She grabbed her mother’s arms and towed her out of the room, through the back door and into their rear garden. She couldn’t let the maids overhear the conversation she wished to have. Gossip had destroyed her once; she would not give it the chance to do so again. “Slow down, Sarah, my old bones cannot keep up with you.”

“Mama, he is here.”

“Who is here?”

“The Earl of Lakefield. He is here!” Sarah said in a harried whisper, drawing her mother so that they could hide between the wisteria bushes in the garden.

“Lakefield…is that the one with the horse business?”

“No, Mama, that is Lakeshore,” Sarah said, a little irked by her mother’s forgetfulness. “The Earl of Lakefield is Henry Stewart. He is one of the reasons we are here in Swanage, Mama. He is the one who…” she broke off, unable to say the words. She watched as her mother’s green eyes widened, the memory coming back clearly suddenly.

“Oh, my dear,” she cried and opened her arms. Sarah fell into them, needing the comfort of her mother. When the tears came, she barely realized, not until her mother patted her back and stroked the hair

back from her forehead. “Tears are good things, Sarah. They let the pain out.”

It didn’t feel like a good thing, it just felt like even more pain.

Chapter 3

Sarah had retreated back to her room to finish her tears, hopeful that neither the maids nor the cook could hear her crying. It didn't seem to matter how many times she told herself to stop crying, the tears came anyway. She tried staring out of the tall chamber window that overlooked the town and offered a slim view of the sea, but it did nothing to distract her.

"I cannot be distracted now."

Apparently intent on tormenting herself, she hurried away from the window toward a tall chest of drawers that was pushed into the corner of the room. In the top drawer, pushed right to the back so that it could not be found easily, was a sketchbook. She retrieved it, hurried to the window and sat in the windowseat. With her feet curled up under her and an arm resting against the glass, trying to cool down from the touch of it, she untied the ribbon that kept the sketchbook closed and opened the leather cover.

This was a sketchbook that only she knew existed. Two years ago, after she had fled London with her mother and late father, she had purchased this sketchbook and drawn all of the dreams that haunted her inside it. At first, it was painful, but she realized in time that there was something soothing about drawing the memories. It was as though by drawing what had happened, she could let go of the sharpness of each memory.

She turned to the first page, pulling back the tissue paper that separated the pages, to reveal the first sketch. She was dancing at the ball, in Lord Lakefield's arms. Her face was not visible in the picture, but the dress was. It was her finest dress, Pomona green, cinched high on the waist and with a deep neckline, Lord Lakefield couldn't stop saying how beautiful she was in it. The picture clearly showed the extent to which she was clinging to his hand as they waltzed together. She could also see his smile.

He was younger in the picture before her than how he had appeared on the promenade where she had just seen him. Today, there had been a line of stubble along his chin. It suited him, more than she wanted to admit to herself. In the drawing, he was clean shaven, with her sketch shaded along his jawline.

It was the picture that made her the happiest.

She turned the page, pulling out the next leaf of protective tissue to see the next sketch. She was dancing with the Duke of Huntingdon, Charles Wesney. From her sketch she could see the way he was leaning toward her, in his cups and being far too forward. Her own body in the sketch was half turned away from him, looking for Lord Lakefield amongst the other dancers and unable to find him.

The picture on the opposite page was the one that brought back the harshest memories. She clutched at her chest with one hand as her breathing picked up, staring at the image.

She had been dragged into the music room, outside the Duke's ballroom and she was fighting against him, desperate to be free, but he had one arm firmly around her waist and his other hand was reaching for her dress. She had drawn his fingers to be more like talons from a bird of prey, for that was how they had felt, clawing at her, trying to get at her. Her own expression in the picture was one of agony.

She turned the next page to find the picture that she could never forget. She was trying to push the Duke off her, failing, crying, as Lord Lakefield opened the door. He had come for her, fearing what was happening, but in his attempt to save her, he had also condemned her. For behind him in the doorway were lots of other faces, all intrigued to see what was happening and peering round the doorframe.

She had been caught in a compromising situation. It hardly mattered that it was against her will, or that she was crying in her desperation to be free of the Duke. All that mattered to the people who had seen them was that she was a fallen woman, her reputation destroyed.

She lifted a finger and traced Lord Lakefield's face on the page, the pencil shading showing clearly the pain in his expression, just as she remembered it. She had never known what he was thinking at that moment, though she felt she could guess it. Judgement, for having not been able to escape the Duke. Disappointment, that she was now a ruined woman. Anger too, that everything they had shared between them laid in tatters.

She closed the sketchbook harshly, unable to look at any of the other sketches in the book. Her tears were beginning to stall and the stains upon her cheeks were drying as she rested her forehead on the glass.

“What did he think of me when he saw me today?” she whispered, clouding the glass with her breath.

Henry’s heartbeat wouldn’t settle. The entire journey to the inn at the back of town, he could feel it thrumming through his body.

“She’s here.”

“What did you say?” Lord Hector called to him from nearby.

“Nothing,” he said tightly, feeling the memory of the last time he had seen her coursing through his body. He had just pulled her away from the Duke. She had fallen into his arms at first as he drew her away from the gossiping guests at the ball. With a maid following them to chaperone, he had found a room for them to be alone together, to ascertain exactly what the Duke had done when she told him to leave her.

“How can I leave you now?” he had asked her, furious at the suggestion. *“Tell me what he did, Sarah. Tell me he did not…”*

“What does it matter?” She had been crying as she threw the words at him, desperately trying to reset her torn dress. *“I am a ruined lady. They all think the Duke and I…even though we did not. He has destroyed me.”*

“We’ll figure this out, all right?”

“Figure it out? My parents might force me to marry him. How can I marry such a demon?”

“I will not let that happen. I give you my word.”

“How can you have anything to do with me now?” she had asked, looking at him and backing away from him, with her hands holding the rips in her dress. He had followed her across the room.

“We can deal with the reputation later. Sarah, I am not leaving you alone in this mess.”

“You have no choice,” she had said miserably. *“I have to go.”*

“I’ll come see you tomorrow.”

“No, you cannot,” she had cried insistently as she hovered in the doorway. *“Being associated with me from now on would only damage you and your family.”* At the time, he hadn’t cared about that. His father had impressed upon him again and again later how this was important, that he could never see Miss Kingston anymore for this very reason, that being associated was a stain on their family’s character.

“I cannot stay in London.”

“What? No!” He had tried to follow her from the room, though she wouldn’t let him, and at first blocked off his path.

“I cannot go to such events like this again. Balls, parties, assemblies, anything! I cannot be with people without the gossip following me forever more. I cannot see you ever again.”

“Sarah, no!” He had run after her then, pursued her through the corridors of the Duke’s house and out tothe carriage. He had pleaded with her all the way to listen to him, that there had to be another way, but she hadn’t listened. She had been crying too much, in shock and fear of what had happened. He knew very well that his words hadn’t come out well. He had been too much in shock himself, scarcely able to form a coherent sentence.

As her carriage had pulled away, he had stared after it, feeling sickened. He had lost her, and she had vowed not to see him again. The next day he had gone to see her, but she had gone. No matter how many times he visited her house, the staff explained the family were not coming back. With no news of where they could be hiding, and with his father impressing on him the need to avoid acquaintance with the Kingstons altogether, he was forced to give up searching for her, forced to give up hope. The only blessing he had was that her parents had not forced her into marriage with the Duke after all.

“You are lost in thought, my friend.” Lord Hector’s voice brought Henry back to the moment. The carriage was turning onto the road where the inn was, with their horses following behind. Lord Hector appeared to be watching him intently. “You also look in pain.”

“I feel it,” Henry acknowledged, knowing he could not deny it. Before

anymore could be said between them, there was a commotion up ahead.

His aunt's carriage slumped into a deep pothole. The movement was so sudden that the carriage bounced along the road, jolting the people inside. The abrupt and loud clatter spooked the horses in front. One of the mares whinnied loudly and reared back on her hind legs.

Henry only just had time to urge his steed forward to see what was happening. The mare so spooked couldn't settle, no matter how many times the coach driver pulled on the horses and called to her, desperately trying to get her under control. Henry pulled alongside her, reaching for the side of her reins and trying to get control of her too, but she grew even more alarmed at someone being so nearby.

She turned on her hind legs and dropped back down, right onto the other horse that was pulling the carriage. The squeal that went up showed the agony the other horse was in, even before Henry saw the blood. He craned to the side in his saddle, just as the coach driver got control of the horses, pulling them both sharply to a stop. Beneath the harnesses and around the first horse, Henry could see where the mare had hurt the second horse. With her hooves lashing out she had cut deeply into the other horse's leg, drawing blood. The animal had the leg up in the air, occasionally trying to put the very tip of the hoof down to the track beneath them before lifting it high again, clearly suffering in pain.

"Good lord, what a racket!" Catherine's voice called from inside the carriage. Before Henry could move to the coach's side, the door was flung open, and Catherine pushed her head out. "Henry? What is happening?"

"One horse spooked, one horse injured," Henry said, pulling his own horse back to be level with her.

"How badly?" she asked, clambering down from the carriage. He went to help her, offering his hand, but she batted the hand away. "I am perfectly capable of climbing out a carriage myself, Henry."

"I was being polite," he said, smiling at his aunt's antics.

"I know, dear, but sometimes I like to prove I can still do things myself," she said smiling before rounding the carriage to look at the horse, her rounded form swaying with the long skirt of her empire-

line gown. “Ah…” she grimaced as she saw the injury. “Well, the poor animal will not be able to ride anymore tonight.”

“What?” Henry said, jumping down from his steed and coming to her side. Any other time, he would have been happy to admit that the horse did look too injured to carry on, but not now. “We have to leave, we have to get to Exeter. We were merely going to stop for a meal.”

“Change of plans,” Catherine said decisively. “We will have to stay the night whilst the horse recovers. We shall see how the animal fares tomorrow and judge then whether we can carry on or not.”

“Aunt, no.” Henry’s sudden sharp voice made Catherine whip her head to the side, the eyebrows arching so highly that they nearly disappeared into her grey hairline.

“Ooh, if looks could kill,” Lord Hector’s voice came from nearby. Henry shot a look to his friend, seeing Lord Hector on his horse beside where Henry had left his own steed. “We’d have to arrest your aunt for murder.”

“It is just one night, Henry, we can stay that long,” Catherine said, as though the matter were already decided on. Henry shifted between his feet, feeling the anger build within his gut. Catherine knew all about what had happened two years ago, so Henry knew he could tell her that he had just seen Miss Kingston, in the effort to persuade her they had to move on, but Catherine had always liked Miss Kingston. He had a feeling making such an argument would not go in his favor.

“We can rent another horse,” Henry said, alighting on the idea. “We can rent another and leave this one here to recover.”

“In Swanage? Pah!” Catherine laughed. “You’re in a sleepy seaside town now, Henry, not London with horses on every corner. No, the matter is settled, we shall stay here the night.”

He couldn’t allow that. He couldn’t risk seeing Miss Kingston again. She had cut him out of her life, never written, never found him again. She had made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with him.

“But, Aunt, can we just –”

“My mind is made up, Henry,” she said, before turning away and

gesturing to the footman. “I shall walk from here, it is just at the end of the street. Thomas, be so good as to bring the bags, would you?”

Henry watched with his arms folded as the carriage was slowly unpacked. He was aware of Lord Hector climbing down from his horse and moving to Henry’s side, before clapping him on the shoulder.

“Do you ever win an argument against your aunt?” he asked in a whisper as Catherine strode off down the street.

“I’ll tell you if it ever happens.”

Chapter 4

Sarah moved the paintbrush up the canvas, filling in the very edge of the white sea foam that crawled up the beach. With the wave finished, she sat back straight behind the easel, looking upon the painting she had created. It was how she filled her days, sketching and painting the beautiful scenery around them. She had painted so many scenes of the bay, she couldn't count them, but they were never enough. She found all the paintings lacked something – not one of them could truly match the beauty of Swanage Bay.

She gazed upon the canvas, feeling that something was missing from this one too. It was a view down from the promenade, of the empty beach, the ocean that stretched out, and the chalk stacks of Old Harry Rocks in the background, almost shaded in the sea mist with a few wispy clouds streaking the blue sky. It was taken from a preparatory sketch she had made after going walking with Rebecca one day.

"Something is missing," she said decisively, picking up the palette again, frustrated at how poor the painting felt to her. She was a skilled painter by now, so the problem wasn't that the paint had been applied in an ill way. It simply lacked focus.

Chewing her lip in thought, she began to mix a new color, blending hues together on her brown palette before lifting the paintbrush back to the canvas. Quickly, with deft fingers, she put someone into the painting. It was a tall figure standing on the beach and looking out across the ocean toward Old Harry Rocks.

She painted him without a jacket, just as she had seen him astride the horse. Though his back was to her viewpoint, she knew it was him. She even painted in his chocolate brown hair that curled around his ears. The figure was plain to recognize, with the stance wide and his black hessian boots planted firmly in the sand, with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

"That's better," she murmured, sitting back from the easel as a smile took up its place in her features. Abruptly, the painting had come together remarkably well. With the focus of a figure staring out to the ocean and the view, there was perspective and a new warmth to the painting.

"Who is that?" Rebecca's voice startled Sarah so much that she

fumbled with the palette, nearly dropping it. In her effort not to drop it on the floor to the white sheet she had laid down to protect the floor from paint flecks, she managed to close one palm over the blobs of paint on the palette, spreading wet paint all over her fingers. “Ah, I have a feeling that was my fault. Apologies for surprising you.”

“How did you get in?” Sarah asked, turning round on her painting stool, still with the palette flat to her fingers, watching as Rebecca walked in from the doorway.

“One of the maids let me in and said you’d be in here,” she said with a smile, walking toward Sarah with a spring in her step. “Here, the least I can do is offer you this,” she said and offered Sarah a handkerchief to clear up the mess.

“Thank you,” Sarah said, placing down the palette and beginning to clean off the paint from her fingers. “I will go wash up. Give me a minute.” Distracted from what she had added to the painting, she hurried off to find some fresh water in the kitchen to wash up, before returning moments later to find Rebecca had taken her seat on the stool and was staring at the picture with a rather mischievous smile in place.

“You didn’t answer my question. Who is that?” Rebecca asked, pointing at the painting.

“No one,” Sarah said, snatching the canvas up off the easel and walking away with it. Being careful not to touch the wet paint, she turned around and looked at it, so that Rebecca could no longer see her face. She couldn’t understand why she had painted Lord Lakefield into the picture, it had just felt right. Even now when she was looking at his figure that she had recreated, she felt warmth blooming in her chest.

“I have eyes too you know,” Rebecca said with glee. Sarah added the painting to a row of others that were drying and turned to look at her friend.

“I have noticed,” Sarah said with wit.

“My point is, I am sure I saw that same curling brown hair somewhere else this week.” Rebecca tapped her chin, as though wracking her brains to recall the memory.

“Do not think too hard, my friend,” Sarah said softly, “I’d be quite happy if you didn’t remember it.”

“How could I forget you nearly falling off the promenade?”

“Rebecca!”

“It was only yesterday,” Rebecca laughed. “A handsome Earl. Well, I wish I had such an excuse to add a man to my paintings.”

“It’s not him,” Sarah said hurriedly, walking back to her friend.

“It certainly looks like him.”

“You are imagining things.”

“Would I do such a thing?” Rebecca asked innocently.

“You would. You have a rather active imagination, you know,” Sarah said and took her friend’s shoulders, spinning her on the stool so that she was facing a different direction in the room and could no longer see the picture. “Now, your arrival is a surprise.”

“We always go sketching on Thursdays, have you forgotten?” Rebecca asked. Sarah froze. She had been moving toward a nearby chair but gave up when the words struck her.

“I suppose I had forgotten.” She had been so busy caught up in her thoughts, thinking of what had happened two years before, that she hadn’t even considered what day it was.

“Clearly your mind is absorbed with something else. Or someone else,” Rebecca teased.

“Remind me to tease you mercilessly like this when you meet a gentleman in the future,” Sarah quipped.

“Like I’d remind you of that.” Rebecca jumped to her feet with her own sketchbook tucked under her arm. “Now, come on, we’re off out. Fresh air and a stretch of the legs.”

“I cannot go out.”

“Of course, you can,” Rebecca said. “A door handle is really very easy

to use. You just have to twist it." Her wit made a laugh fall from Sarah's lips before she shook her head.

"I am staying indoors today," she said firmly. She had decided upon it late last night. As the Earl was in town, he had to be passing through on route to somewhere else. If she wished to avoid him, then as long as she spent today indoors, she would be safe from seeing him again. If he had stayed at an inn, he was likely to move on before the end of the day.

"Do you intend to become a hermit just to avoid the man in your painting?" Rebecca asked.

"Rebecca!" Sarah said, whipping her head round in surprise. "I told you, it's not him in the painting."

"Sure, it isn't," Rebecca said with a smile. "Either way, you can't stay indoors on a day like this. Please, come outside with me?" She moved to stand in front of Sarah and put her hands together in a pleading motion.

"Are you that desperate for a walk?" Sarah asked, feeling her resistance beginning to wane. Maybe she could go for a small walk, as long as they avoided the center of town.

"Dying for a walk!" Rebecca said with a dramatic tone. "One short walk. Please?" Sarah couldn't resist her friend and the freckled cheeks that were spread into a smile.

"Fine, one very short walk."

"Yes!" Rebecca declared in triumph.

Sarah was sat on a rock set into the side of the hill, overlooking the beach and the rockpools nearby at the very edge of the bay. Fortunately, Rebecca seemed to have taken Sarah's fear to heart and promised they would not walk near the center of town. This meant that they were tucked away in this secluded spot, with a rather steep drop before them, down to the sandy beach below.

"Well, it is a fine view, indeed," Rebecca said, sat beside her on the rock, not doing much sketching at all.

“That it is,” Sarah said as she quickly moved her pencil across her sketchbook, creating a facsimile of the view before her.

“Fine day for sketching.”

“What an odd statement to make when you are barely sketching,” Sarah teased her. She looked up to see Rebecca smiling.

“I am thinking before I place pencil to paper.”

“Oh, yes, the best way to sketch,” Sarah mocked her, earning a sharp jab of Rebecca’s elbow before they laughed together once more. Thankful for the distraction from her thoughts of seeing Lord Lakefield, Sarah looked down to her sketch.

Just as that morning, she felt something was missing from the sketch. There was no focus in it. Looking solely at the picture rather than the view, she began to draw in another figure. It was remarkably similar to the last one, with his back turned to her once again. Only this time, his jacket had been slung over his arm, with his shirt sleeves still rolled up. She was careful to make sure his hair was buffeted by the wind slightly.

“If I comment on what you are doing, will you deny it again?” Rebecca’s voice made Sarah fall still with the pencil, the nib hovering over the sketch.

“Vehemently,” Sarah declared, earning another laugh from Rebecca.

“Well, I fear I must comment on it.”

“Why must you do that?”

“Because your drawing appears to be coming true.” Rebecca’s words made Sarah snap her head up.

Before them, walking along their side of the beach were two figures. One was the fair-haired man who had been astride one of the horses the day before. The other was Lord Lakefield.

“Oh God have mercy,” Sarah muttered, standing up, intending to leave before he could look up their way and see them there. In her effort to stand so quickly, she hadn’t had hold of the book. It fell of

her lap and down the hill. “No, oh!” She flung her hands to her mouth, unable to catch it before it fell off the incline.

“Something tells me that wasn’t supposed to happen,” Rebecca chuckled at her side. Sarah lowered one hand just long enough to tap Rebecca round the arm in reprimand.

She watched as the sketchbook fell off the grassy incline down onto the beach and by Lord Lakefield’s feet. He looked down at it, clearly startled, before picking it up and brushing the sand off the pages. Sarah found her hands moving to her stomach, as though she could quell the fluttering sensation that erupted inside of her. He had hold of her sketchbook. It was such an intimate thing to her, it felt as though a boundary had been crossed.

He looked up, clearly searching for whoever had dropped the sketchbook, then his eyes landed on her. The somewhat relaxed state his body had been in stiffened, and his spine straightened as their gazes locked.

“If you faint, I can promise to try and catch you,” Rebecca whispered.

“Shush, Rebecca!” Sarah said quickly, though in truth she did feel a little lightheaded. Unsure what else to do when there was a distance between her and Lord Lakefield, she raised a hand and waved at him. She would have happily run from him, had it not been for the sketchbook. She needed to retrieve it. He waved back.

“Well, something tells me we’ll have to go down there now.” Rebecca sighed with the words and jumped to her feet.

“Must we?” Sarah asked.

“Do you want your sketchbook or not?” Rebecca said, clearly full-well knowing the answer.

“Remind me to hit you with the sketchbook when we get it back,” Sarah said under her breath as they both moved toward a set of steps placed in the inclined bank and began to descend toward the beach. Sarah couldn’t take her eyes off Lord Lakefield as he waited for her to come to him, though he did beckon his friend to his side in the interim.

Once they got close, moving out across the sand to meet him, Sarah

couldn't stop fidgeting with her hands and her mouth felt dry. The last time she had seen Lord Lakefield, she had shouted at him to leave her alone, but that same evening she had danced in his arms, dreaming of kissing him.

"Miss Kingston," Lord Lakefield said formally and bowed to her.

"My Lord," she said, curtsying, breaking their eye contact for a minute. "Erm, I'm sorry about the…" She pointed at the sketchbook, feeling how clumsy her words were in her nervousness.

"It is no matter," he said and proffered it to her. She was ashamed to see it had fallen by his feet open on the same page that she had been drawing, revealing the sketch of him from the back. She took it quickly from his hands and closed the pages, praying he hadn't recognized himself in it. He cleared his throat, looking about as nervous as she felt. "May I introduce Lord Arthur Hector," he gestured to the friend beside him.

Sarah and Rebecca curtsied.

"Lord Hector, this is Miss Kingston," he continued, gesturing to her.

"This is my friend, Miss Rebecca Hampshire," Sarah completed the introductions. Once all was done, she returned her eyes to Lord Lakefield, staring at him. An awkward silence descended between the four of them all, making Sarah's hands so clammy that they became damp around the sketchbook.

"I see you are about to walk across the rockpools," Rebecca said, taking up a thread of conversation.

"Yes, we were," Lord Hector said, gesturing behind them to that part of the beach. "Our innkeeper would not let us leave this morning until we promised to see the finest view in Swanage."

"What a coincidence, we were just thinking about a walk there ourselves," Rebecca declared.

"We were?" Sarah said, earning a sharp tap to her foot with Rebecca's boot before she could say anymore.

"May we join you?" Rebecca asked. Sarah was so angry, she could have happily denied the claim, but to do so would be incredibly rude.

It seemed her friend was determined on embarrassing her, by forcing her into the company of Lord Lakefield again.

“Well, we were uncertain of our path –” Lord Lakefield said, before he was cut off.

“We’d be delighted for you to join us,” Lord Hector said, apparently as intent on embarrassing the both of them as Rebecca was.

Chapter 5

“Perhaps I could show you the finest view, Lord Hector?” Miss Hampshire said, walking away and gesturing down the beach.

“What a wonderful idea,” Lord Hector said, hurrying after her. “I am right behind you.”

Henry winced at his friend’s lack of subtlety in the effort to give him a little bit of privacy with Miss Kingston. He supposed as a group of four they could be seen as chaperoning each other, yet with the distance Lord Hector and Miss Hampshire had created, it was clear they intended to leave him reasonably alone with Miss Kingston.

“Your friend seems…” he said, staring after where the two of them had retreated, in the effort not to look too long at Miss Kingston. “Eager to see the view.”

“If she continues like this, my friend will not be my closest friend for much longer,” Miss Kingston said, proving she was still witty. The amusing quip urged him to look back to her, trying to fight a smile.

“Ah, so you have told her that we have met?” he asked, gazing upon her features. Those green eyes were staring intently up at him, even though her hands fidgeted constantly around the sketchbook.

“That we have met, yes, but nothing more,” she said. There was something in it that brought him relief. For a minute, neither of them said anything. He couldn’t stop staring at her. She had changed, just as he had noted the day before. She looked a little older, but had grown into her beauty even more, with those bold green eyes looking at him.

He couldn’t get his mind off the sketchbook that had fallen open at his feet either, with a figure sketched upon it. Who was it that she had sketched into her view?

“I suppose we should follow them,” she said hurriedly, walking around him. “I cannot leave my friend without a chaperone, after all.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, turning to follow her. For a minute, he just traipsed behind her, feeling jittery at the distance they had created. Part of him thought about taking her hand and demanding to know

why she had disappeared for two years. He wanted to know how she could cast him aside so easily, after all that they had shared, ignore him, disappear from his life. Yet two years was a long time. He couldn't bring it up now, it was too painful and too awkward.

Still, silence was just as awkward, and he felt determined to break it. He hurried up to her side, opting for polite conversation instead.

"So, what do you think of Swanage?" he asked, opting for plain niceties.

"I love it," she said, not looking at him, but setting her eyes ahead of them at the other two in their party. "It is a fine place to live, quiet, with kind people. How come you are here?"

"I am just passing through," he explained softly. With the common pleasantry out of the way and done with, he found other words falling from his lips, in a question he had been certain he wasn't going to ask but seemed unable to restrain himself from. "Is this where you have been hiding these last two years?"

His question brought her up short. She came to a stop and turned to him, with the sea breeze rippling through her hair, casting loose red tendrils across her cheeks. He was tempted to lift his fingers and pull those locks off her face, but that was something he had done in another life, long ago. He could not do it now.

"Y-yes, I suppose so," she said, lifting her chin higher and walking on again. "Though I would not call it hiding, not as such."

"I certainly would," he said, following along side of her. He was aware of the look she sent him. There was strength in her now. It was somewhat different to how she used to be, stronger in character and resilience. He rather liked this new strength to her. "Do you like it here? Are you happy here?"

He felt pained as he asked his latter question. It was something that had plagued him ever since he had found her in the Duke's arms, crying and trying to claw her way free. The pain and the fear on her face at that moment haunted him. It mattered that she never suffered so again.

"I am happy," she said, looking back to him and betraying a small smile. "It is a nice place to live a quiet life."

“Very quiet, from what I have seen,” he said a little tartly.

“What does that mean?” she asked, frowning a little at him.

“I guess I remember a time when you talked of travelling,” he said, walking forward and looking out to the ocean. He needed a break from looking at her. Staring at those features was reminding him of when she had last been in his arms, dancing with him at the ball. He could remember feeling audacious, with their bodies hidden by other dancers and holding her a little closer than normal. He feared if he looked at her for too long now, he would seek out an excuse to establish some touch between them.

“That was a long time ago,” she said sadly, walking alongside him.

“Is two years so long?”

“It certainly feels it to me,” she said, her tone strong.

“You talked of longing to travel and see other places.”

“Yes, but I was a fool, my Lord,” she said. The confidence in her declaration prompted him to dart his head back to her.

“You were never a fool,” he said with feeling, but she didn’t appear to register his words. She stared forward at the rockpools and continued walking forward.

“I was. I talked of seeing the continent, Paris, in particular, Venice too. Then of course there was India.”

“You talked more of India than anywhere else,” he said with a slow nod, remembering it vividly. “I can remember countless conversations where you talked about the place’s history, you made it sound exotic, and one of the best places on this earth to be.”

“I remember thinking that,” she said with a sort of sad smile. “I was a fool, my Lord, because back then I believed seeing such a place was possible.”

“Is it not possible?” he asked, seeing her smile fade away. It made him ache to see it gone.

“No,” she said, returning her gaze to him briefly. “The world is not so kind as to give us what we want, my Lord.”

“Yes, I had noticed,” he said darkly, turning his own gaze ahead. He felt the way she stepped away from him, increasing the distance slightly between them. He longed to shorten it again. “Tell me you are truly happy, Miss Kingston, and I shall have some peace.”

“What?” she asked, coming to a sharp stop. He stopped too, turning back to her.

“Tell me you are truly happy,” he repeated himself, needing to hear it again.

“I am happy, my Lord. You can believe that,” she said, though the smile was still sad. He didn’t believe her words. To his mind, she seemed to be covering something up. “I think we should catch up to our friends.”

“Yes, we should.” He turned and walked toward the rockpools.

As they began to clamber over the rocks that were slippery with seawater, he saw Miss Kingston slip just once, before she settled her feet. Automatically, he held out a hand to her, offering to help her. She looked up to him, her green eyes so wide that the color of the ocean was reflected back at him in them.

“What?” he asked, feeling a small smile tug at his lips for the first time. “You are staring at me like my hand is made of seaweed.” She smiled at his jest. The brief way it lit up her features made something lurch in his chest. It was a lurch he hadn’t felt in two years.

“I am capable of walking by myself, my Lord,” she said, taking another step.

“I do not doubt you are,” he said, reminded of his aunt’s same complaints. “It is merely that your shoes do not have as much grip as mine.”

She took a step past him and slipped again, though she managed to catch herself once more. He offered his hand another time, and on this occasion, she took it, though she didn’t look at him as she did so. The touch of her hand in his was warm. She wasn’t wearing gloves because of the heat of the day. It allowed their fingers to wrap perfectly

around each other, palm against palm, reminding him of the last time they had danced together. There was something intense about it that made him look away from her, concentrating on traversing the rockpools instead.

“This way,” he said, helping her to cross the stones.

“I was sorry to read about your father’s passing,” she said softly.

“You heard?” he asked.

“We may be in the backend of nowhere here, but we manage to get newspapers, just like anyone else,” she teased him, pulling another smirk to his lips.

“I was rather aghast at the lack of papers this morning in the inn. Thank you for your commiserations.”

“Do you mind if I ask how he passed? I remember him well. I was sad to read of his passing.” Her words made him hold onto her a little more. He could remember how kind Miss Kingston had always been to his father. That’s what made the cruel things his father had said about her after the incident all the more painful to listen to.

“It was a short illness that affected his lungs,” he said, stepping over one of the rockpools. He hesitated, waiting until she had crossed it too. He was sure to keep hold of her hand, just in case she slipped again. “Fortunately, my aunt has barely left my side since.”

“Lady Lamptonshire?” Miss Kingston’s face lit up with a full smile. It was the first full smile he had yet seen in her features, the sight of it warmed him even more. “How is she?”

“Very well. Ordering me around as usual and never far from a smile.”

“She was always such good company to be around,” Miss Kingston said, stepping past him.

“Yes, she said the same about you.”

They crossed another couple of rockpools together, getting closer and closer to where Lord Hector and Miss Hampshire were on the far side of the rockpools, standing near where the tide met them.

“I have to say,” he said, struck by the view before him, “I’m rather surprise at my innkeeper’s insistence we came here today.”

“Why?” Miss Kingston asked.

“It’s a fine view, yes,” he said, then gestured up to the clifftop with his free hand, “but I most certainly had a finer view when I rode into the town yesterday.”

“That is because you are looking in the wrong place,” she said plainly, as if he was being silly.

“What do you mean?”

“Look.” She pulled on his hand, urging him to crouch down to the nearest rockpool beside him. She released his hand and together, they bent down, as she pointed into the rockpool with a slim covering of sea water inside it.

“What am I looking at exactly?” he asked, aware he was just staring at sand and a few pebbles.

“You have to look beneath the surface if you want to see what is truly there.” Her voice was gentle. The tone of it was different to anything he had heard from her before, it prompted him to look up to her, and trace the curve of her smile across her cheeks. “I said look at the rockpool, my Lord, not at me.”

He laughed, startled by the easy flirtation she had made. It was something he had missed greatly.

“Very well, I am looking at the rockpool. Though I cannot vow not to look at you again,” he said, flirting back, aware that she giggled softly. She picked up a shell from nearby and tossed it into the center of the rockpool.

At first, rings rippled through the water from where the shell had landed, then things began to move beneath. Shells began to move. With amazement, he leaned forward, seeing small crab legs pop out of shells and scurry beneath the water. There were two crabs too, one large and one small, clambering sideways under the nearest blob of seaweed. Off to one side was a starfish, dark brown with russet orange dots, it moved in the water, before settling back down again. The fascination thrilled him as he looked much closer, before lifting his

head to meet Miss Kingston's eyes. She was still smiling.

"I have surprised you," she said.

"Very much."

"See? We cannot always see what is beneath the surface. It simply means we must look harder." He felt there was something else to her words, something that made him stare at her, not replying for a minute. "You are looking too intently again, my Lord," she said, standing to her feet.

"My apologies, I was simply impressed with what you had showed me." He stood to his feet and offered his hand once more to her, to help cross the rockpools. This time at least, she did not hesitate so much.

As they finished crossing the pools, reaching an open stretch of sand, he didn't release her hand straight away, though he knew he should. He held it for a beat longer, simply thankful to be able to experience being with her again, then the hand was taken out of his grasp.

"Lord Lakefield?" Lord Hector's voice called to him.

"Yes?" Henry stepped away from Miss Kingston, keen to not be seen to be under her control. It would hardly be a good thing, would it? He had his heart broken by her once, and after one short meeting he was holding onto her hand longer than decorum dictated. *This is not a good thing!*

"We will be late for tea with your aunt, we must go," Lord Hector said moving back to his side.

"Ah, wonderful," he tried not to sound too relieved by the excuse to leave, though he was aware of Miss Kingston turning her head away from him. "We will take our leave of you then," he said, just as Miss Hampshire returned to Miss Kingston's side.

"Good day to you both, ladies," Lord Hector bowed first as they curtsied.

"Miss Hampshire," Henry said, bowing to her. "Miss Kingston." He noticed his voice had deepened, and as she curtsied to him, she didn't bow her head entirely, she held his gaze instead. When he didn't walk

away immediately, Lord Hector pushed him in the back to do so.

The two of them hurried off, with Lord Hector laughing beside him.

“Why are you laughing?” Henry said, once he was certain they were far out of earshot of the ladies.

“I swear I have never seen you stare so long at anything before, not as much as you do Miss Kingston.”

“Pray, do not remind me!”

Chapter 6

"Right, I have had enough of this." Rebecca's declaration went unnoticed by Sarah first of all. She was too busy staring after the retreating figure of Lord Lakefield as he crossed the beach, heading toward the other side of the bay and the promenade.

"Did you say something?" Sarah asked, her mind occupied elsewhere. She was still hurting in her chest, from being forced into Lord Lakefield's company again, but there had been something else as well. It was the warmth of him holding her hand another time, something she had thought she would never experience again, there was the flirtation too.

One particular thing he'd said was staying with her though: *"Tell me you are truly happy, Miss Kingston, and I shall have some peace."*It had suggested he wasn't at peace.

"I see there is only one way I can get your attention," Rebecca said firmly, just as Sarah found her sketchbook snatched out of her grasp.

"Wait, where are you going with that?" Sarah asked, running after her friend. Rebecca was laughing and walking along the sea edge, holding it aloft in her hands.

"Well, that worked!"

"All right, you have my attention. What was it you said?" Sarah called, chasing after her along the beach.

"I wish to know how you know the Earl," Rebecca said, coming to a stop, though she held the sketchbook out of Sarah's reach and behind her back.

"It is not important."

"Not important?" Rebecca said, her eyes going wide. "Sarah, you were clinging onto the man's hand as though your life depended on it."

"I was slipping on the rockpools." Sarah sought out the excuse.

"Sure, you were," Rebecca said with a smile. "So why when you caught me looking at you did you snatch your hand away from his?"

Sarah crossed her arms, choosing not to reply, but just darkened her gaze instead. “Do you still like me? Or is our friendship taking a dark turn?” Rebecca said with a giggle.

“Rebecca, you cannot tease me about this matter,” Sarah complained, making another dive for the sketchbook, but Rebecca held it out of her reach and spun round, stopping her from getting it. She watched as Rebecca’s laughter died, clocking the expression on Sarah’s features.

“Oh my…” she paused, taking a step back to look at her more closely. “This is not a remotely laughing matter, is it?”

“No, it is not.” Sarah fisted her hands in the skirt of her dress, feeling all her stresses and fears come back to her. “Rebecca, you should not have encouraged me into the Earl’s company.”

“I am sorry.” Rebecca looked truly apologetic for it. “You merely seemed to like the man, more so than I can say, I thought it would be fun.”

“It wasn’t fun, it was heartbreaking!” Before Sarah could say anymore, Rebecca reached out and took her hand.

“Then for that I am truly sorry I forced you into his company, but Sarah, I do not know here what is going on. Here is a man from your past that you are clearly quite taken with. What is it that I do not know?” Rebecca’s question made Sarah grimace and stare out at the ocean, trying to buy some time to think of how to answer her friend. She had kept it a secret for so long, she half considered lying about it, but she knew she couldn’t. The time had come to tell.

“I was not just ‘quite taken with him’, as you call it,” she said sadly, slowly turning her gaze back to her friend. “I was in love with him, Rebecca.”

“And now?”

“What?”

“Are you still in love with him?”

“No, I can’t be,” she spoke abruptly, her tone so harsh that she could see Rebecca recoiling from it. “I have not seen him for two years.It is

not possible to love someone after all that time apart."

"Then…why are you crying, Sarah?" Rebecca asked gently, taking another step toward her. Sarah hadn't noticed it was coming, but she wiped away the first tear upon her cheek, drying it as quickly as she could. She couldn't still be in love with the Earl. She didn't know who he was anymore. "Oh, what happened?"

It came out, all of it, in a flurry of words with Sarah speaking so fast that each word jumbled together.

"Our fathers knew each other. My father was training to be a lawyer, the late Earl of Lakefield trained in law at university, though he never had to go into the occupation. After that, our families were friends. Lord Lakefield and I grew up, practically side by side. Then he went to university, and I went to finishing school, and after that, when we saw each other again, everything had changed. It was no longer just a soft spot for each other, or youngsters holding hands, it all meant…" she broke off, closing her eyes as she remembered the first time that he had taken her hand after they saw each other again.

"So much more?" Rebecca offered.

"Yes." Sarah sighed with the word as she opened her eyes. "We were living in and out of each other's pockets, then courtship came, I was certain the last night I saw him at a ball that he was going to ask me to marry him." She could see Rebecca smile with hope. "No, no do not look hopeful, for that was the night everything went wrong." Rebecca's smile vanished. "There was a man at the ball."

For some reason, Sarah found she couldn't say his name, perhaps because saying his name brought back with harshness what he had tried to do to her.

"He was intoxicated," she said, feeling how strained her voice had become as more tears slipped down her cheeks. "I said no, I kept saying no, yet he dragged me away from the ball anyway. I tried screaming at one point, but he put his hand over my mouth."

Rebecca's jaw had gone slack, and her lip started to tremble, fighting off her own tears.

"Did he…?" Rebecca trailed off.

“No, he did not get what he wanted,” Sarah said with feeling, “but he caused great damage anyway.” She could still remember the fingers clawing at her, touching where she did not want to be touched. “I called for help, Lord Lakefield came, but he was not alone. Others followed him. With the door open, he was not the only one to see me, others did too with gossiping tongues, seeing my dress all torn and in the arms of…of that man.”

Rebecca was holding even tighter to Sarah’s hand.

“I am a ruined woman, Rebecca,” Sarah said miserably.

“You are not ruined,” Rebecca said, pushing their sketchbooks under one of their arms and retrieving a handkerchief that she used to hurriedly dry Sarah’s cheeks. “You are not damaged.”

“My reputation is!”

“I hardly care for such things,” Rebecca declared strongly. “Did you think I would? Is that why you haven’t told me before?”

“I…I feared you would,” Sarah said, leaning into her friend’s hands as she dried her tears. “You are the most important friend I have. I didn’t want to lose you.”

“You cannot lose me,” Rebecca said. “In case you haven’t noticed, I stick to you rather like a limpet does on these sea rocks.” The image she painted made a smile break through Sarah’s tears. “Yet…your tale does not explain what happened between you and Lord Lakefield?”

“My reputation was in tatters,” Sarah went on as her tears dried up. “I had to leave London. I told my parents I could not marry the Duke, as they first suggested, and they agreed, not keen to tie me to a man like that. So, we retreated from London, and I told Lord Lakefield not to look for me again. How could I? Goodness knows what he thought when he found me that night! Even if he could accept it, accept my reputation was damaged, think of the damage I could have done his family by being associated with him?”

Rebecca said nothing, but she opened her arms and Sarah fell into them, embracing her friend.

“I am so sorry I encouraged you into his company. I had no idea.”

“I know,” Sarah said, hiccoughing as she stopped her tears completely. “Forgive me for not telling you?”

“There is nothing to remotely forgive!” Rebecca said, leaning back and taking Sarah by the shoulders. “You are my friend. I do not care for gossip or reputations; all I care about is that you are clearly still hurting from what happened to you.”

Sarah smiled sadly, comforted by her friend.

“Now, what do you say to we head back to yours?” Rebecca said. “I have dragged you outside for long enough, I am more than happy to return you to your hiding place. Besides, I am sure some of your cook’s carrot cake could cheer us both up.”

“Yes, I bet you are right,” Sarah said. Before either of them could say anymore, there was a rush of water beside them. Sarah knew what was about to happen even before the sudden wave collided with them.

Evidently the tide was coming in, as the wave caught them both by surprise, reaching up to their knees and drenching their petticoats and skirts. They both squealed and stumbled back, just as Rebecca threw her arms into the air and held the sketchbooks high into the sky so that they did not get wet.

As the water retreated back down the beach and they both stood still on the damp sand, they looked at one another, with Rebecca smirking as she looked up to the sketchbooks.

“Well, that would have been the final straw if I had allowed your sketchbook to get wet, wouldn’t it?”

Thankful for her friend’s good humor, Sarah laughed, warmed by it as itbroke apart the sadness that had hung about her shoulders just moments ago.

“Are you unable to walk in a straight line?” Lord Hector asked.

“Hmm?” Henry made a noise, barely able to concentrate on his friend’s words.

“You keep looking back across the beach every few seconds. Continue

like this and you'll walk into the lamp posts, and I am not sure I will make the effort to stop you, it would be far too amusing." Lord Hector's words made Henry turn round, just in time to see that he had very nearly collided with one of the oil-lamp posts. He circled it to follow after Lord Hector, before looking back across the beach another time.

He could still just about make out Miss Kingston at this distance. She and her friend had been caught by the sea and were both drenched as they ran back up to the promenade and a hill nearby. He smiled at the sight, rather thinking that she may have been laughing. It was good to see her happy.

"You are obsessed."

"What?" Henry spun back round, seeing Lord Hector staring at him. "I am not obsessed!"

"Really?" Lord Hector stopped and folded his arms. "Then what was Miss Kingston's friend's name?"

Henry opened his mouth to answer, then realized his mind had gone blank. He did know it, he had thought of it just a moment before, yet now all he could think of was Miss Kingston.

"It's Miss…" he paused, looking at Lord Hector's face for any clues, but his friend gave none away. "Miss T…"

"No, care to choose another letter?"

"Miss B…"

"No," Lord Hector said again, clearly enjoying himself greatly.

"Miss Hampton! It was Miss Hampton," Henry said with delight, clicking his fingers with the movement. "See? I am not obsessed. I can notice others besides Miss Kingston."

"It was Miss Hampshire."

"Ah…" Henry said, dropping his excited manner. Lord Hector guffawed with laughed as he hurried on again, with Henry pursuing close behind him.

“Perhaps I should encourage your aunt to stay longer in Swanage?”

“You will do no such thing!” Henry said decisively as he hurried alongside his friend. Being charmed by Miss Kingston again was all well and good, but his heart had one scar already upon it, he highly doubted he could survive another sharp cut to it. What if he were to fall for her again? What if she were to run away again? It was not worth the risk.

“Why ever not?” Lord Hector asked.

“For one thing, your betrothed will be very unhappy if we are much later to Exeter.” Henry gestured to Lord Hector with the words. “You said yourself you fear her reproach.”

“I have already written to her to explain the night’s delay, I am sure she would understand if we were to stay longer.” He shrugged, as though the matter were no big deal. “Only the other day was she telling me it was high time we found you someone to marry. She was sad to see you sitting alone at her mother’s tea party.”

“I was not sat alone,” Henry said defensively, earning a look from Lord Hector.

“Do you by any chance remember what color her mother’s china was?” he asked.

“Yes, it was blue and white, why?”

“I thought you might remember it,” Lord Hector said as they turned off the promenade and walked down one of the small streets toward the back of town. “You were so busy staring straight at it rather than talking to anyone else.”

“I just didn’t feel like talking.”

“Well, we must stay longer in Swanage, and you can talk to Miss Kingston instead.”

“No, we shall not.” Henry took his friend’s arm, pulling him to a halt. “We have made a promise to go to Exeter, and that is where we shall go. We will not be delayed here, for any reason, whatsoever.”

“Not even for Miss Kingston?”

“Especially not for Miss Kingston,” Henry said, walking on again. As he took the lead, with Lord Hector walking behind him, he could hear Lord Hector muttering a little.

“Well to put a spin on the original phrase, the lord doth protest too much methinks!”

Chapter 7

“Lady Lamptonshire, you will never guess who we just saw?” Lord Hector said as he walked into the sitting room in the inn. Henry tensed hearing the words. Before Lord Hector could say anymore, Henry elbowed his friend, quite sharply in the rib. “Oomph! Ow, that one hurt.”

“Henry?” Catherine looked up from the book she had been reading, peering over her spectacles with the book in one hand and a teacup balanced perfectly in the other. “I may be getting old, but I have not gone blind yet. Why are you hurting your friend?”

“Ha! Aunt, you speak to me like I am still twelve years old,” Henry said, keenly trying to change the topic as he walked into the room.

The inn where they were staying was perhaps not the finest of places, but the sitting room in particular was a well-presented room, with large rococo and chesterfield settees spread about the floor, with Chippendale tables, and a tea service originally from China, in a soft blue and white pattern. Beside where Catherine sat, there were two grand bay windows that flooded the room with sunlight, flanked by duck-egg blue curtains that bristled in the breeze through the open windows.

“When you behave like a twelve-year-old, I will happily berate you for it,” Catherine said, though she had a smile in her features as you spoke. “Now, come sit down for your tea.”

Henry did as she wished, taking the chair beside his aunt and pouring out a cup of tea.

“I take it I am not allowed to inform your aunt of who we met then?” Lord Hector said, bearing a mischievous smile as he leaned on the back of a chesterfield settee nearby. Henry looked up from the tea service, finding his grip tightening around the teapot as he poured.

“I am sure she would not be interested.” Henry lied, for he knew she would be. Catherine had always liked Miss Kingston. Even after she had disappeared and Henry’s father had insisted it was best that a connection between the families was never established again, Catherine had said repeatedly how unfair it was that Miss Kingston should be cast out of society when she never even welcomed the

Duke's advances in the first place. Henry couldn't agree more, but that problem was in the past.

"I am sure I would be," Catherine said, turning her smile on Lord Hector as she placed down her book. "Lord Hector, as my nephew is being so secretive, you shall have to impart his news for him. Who did you meet?"

"Someone from your nephew's past I believe," Lord Hector said, rounding the settee and sitting down into it slowly before revealing his news.

"You have me on tenterhooks, my Lord. Do tell more."

"A Miss Sarah Kingston," Lord Hector declared with a rather overly dramatic tone. The moment the words were out, Henry winced and busied himself with pouring the milk into his tea. He could still picture the way he had held her hand as he helped her across the rockpools. It was startling to see after such a brief meeting with her that he could be under her spell so quickly. He couldn't allow that to happen again.

"Sarah? You saw Sarah? Oh heavens!" Catherine said loudly. The book was cast further aside, the spectacles were dropped to the tea tray too and the teacup nearly went flying in her excitement.

"Aunt, be careful, you'll get tea all over their settee. Then we'll have to buy a new one for the inn," Henry said calmly, not lifting his gaze to his aunt.

"Henry, stop changing the subject."

"Ah, was it so noticeable?"

"Incredibly so!" Catherine said, taking hold of his saucer and sliding his teacup out of his reach so that he was forced to look up to his aunt. "You saw Sarah?"

"I saw Miss Kingston, yes." He made a point of using her formal address. Shortly before she had disappeared out of his life, Miss Kingston had been such a fixture of his life, practically part of the family, that back then he had addressed her by her Christian name, as had Catherine.

“This is where she has been all this time?” Catherine asked, sitting forward in her seat so much that Henry feared she may fall out of it.

“It would appear so,” Henry said slowly, reaching out to take hold of his teacup and sliding it back to himself again.

“Did you speak to her?” Catherine asked, once more sliding the tea away.

“Can I drink my tea, or do I have to pour myself another?” he said with a smirk, watching as she batted his hand away.

“I am trying to hold your attention,” she said firmly.

“Yes, I had noticed.”

“Did you speak to her?”

“Oh yes, he did,” Lord Hector replied before Henry had chance. “We took a turn across the rockpools with her and her friend. Lord Lakefield was very gentlemanly, helping Miss Kingston across the rockpools and holding her hand.”

“Lord Hector –” Henry tried to reprimand his friend but did not get far before his aunt spoke over him.

“Well, this is wonderful news! We must invite the family to tea.” Catherine released his teacup at last and returned to her own. Henry paused midway through retrieving his tea as her words settled.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“Tea. We must invite them.”

“What? What happened to Exeter?” he asked. “We were supposed to leave later this afternoon. Lord Hector’s betrothed is waiting for him. The shooting party is there.”

“The pheasants can wait to be shot for another couple of weeks, Henry. They’re not going anywhere,” Catherine said dismissively.”

“What? No. There is no point in delaying. I spoke to the groom in the stables this morning. He said they have patched up our injured horse and he will be ready to go again today.”

“Ah, yes, well I have since spoken to that same groom and he has now changed his thoughts,” Catherine said, setting her gaze upon her teacup.

“Oh? Has he?” Henry asked, trying to earn his aunt’s gaze again and failing. “Why would he suddenly change his mind?”

“I do not know, but he thinks it best we give it a few days at least.”

“A few days?” Henry repeated sharply. “Did you change his mind for him?”

“I did no such thing!” she said, placing her teacup loudly back in the saucer. “Though I have to say, I think it a rather good idea. You know my physician has prescribed some sea bathing for my ailing back. What could be the better place for it than Swanage? We will stay here for a few days at least. Maybe a week.”

“A week?” Henry managed to knock over his teacup this time in his sudden frantic fear.

“I have never seen you in this state,” Lord Hector said as he leaned forward to help him with the mess.

“I am fine,” Henry said tartly. “We cannot be here a week. Lord Hector’s betrothed will be very angry.”

“She is about to be married to him for the rest of her life. One week away from him will hardly matter in the scale of things.” Catherine dismissed the argument with a wave of her hands.

“I am sure if I write to her and explain the situation, she will be fine with it,” Lord Hector said, still bearing that mischievous smile on his face that showed he knew what a turmoil he had caused for Henry.

“I blame you for this,” Henry said, gesturing to his friend with the tea-stained handkerchief.

“I thought you might.” Lord Hector chuckled.

“Then that’s settled.” Catherine sat back in her chair and sipped more of her tea. “We shall stay for another few days, perhaps a week, and in the meantime, we shall send an invitation to Miss Kingston’s family

and invite them here for tea."

"We cannot do that," Henry said darkly, keeping his gaze averted as his hand froze around the teapot, going to pour himself another teacup.

"Why not?" Catherine asked.

"Do you not remember what happened two years ago?" Henry said, swiveling in his seat to face her.

"What did happen?" Lord Hector asked, but neither of them answered him.

"Do you not remember what my father said in the aftermath?"

"My son was always a little foolish with these things." Catherine shrugged, as though it did not matter.

"Foolish?" Henry repeated in surprise. "He was right. Miss Kingston's reputation is ruined. Damaged beyond repair. He urged us again and again not to renew a connection with her."

"And since when did you listen to your father on matters like this?" Catherine said, putting the teacup and saucer back down on the table with so much energy that all the teacups danced across it. "There was a time when you scoffed at your father for it."

"I know," Henry said sadly. In truth, he didn't agree with his father at all, but it was an argument he could use to help himself to avoid seeing Miss Kingston again now.

"Ruined woman? Pah!" Catherine scoffed at the idea.

"Ruined? What happened to her?" Lord Hector asked.

"Suffice it to say, my Lord, that Miss Kingston was the victim of an attack on her," Catherine spoke morosely as she leaned forward in her chair. "As is the case so many times, the lady's reputation is destroyed and somehow the gentleman's reputation survives. This is despite the fact that what happened was out of no choice of Miss Kingston's."

"And you are sure of that…?" Lord Hector asked warily, earning dark glares from both Catherine and Henry.

“I have never been more certain of anything.” Henry found himself speaking up in her defense. He knew exactly what had happened that night, from the way Miss Kingston had been clinging to him in their dance, as they flirted with one another, down to the fear in her eyes when he had caught her with the Duke’s arms around her.

“Then, if she is not to blame, why should you cut off contact?” Lord Hector asked.

“Because society has decided she should be,” Henry said firmly.

“Henry! You are sounding like your father!” Catherine’s reproach made Henry stiffen and sit straight in his chair. He never wanted to be like his father.

“I know it was not her fault, Aunt,” he said softly and turned to face her once more. “Yet I cannot undo what was done.”

“You can forgive and forget what was done.”

Henry opened his mouth to reply to her, but found Catherine merely spoke over him again.

“So, that is decided upon. We will stay a few more days and we will arrange and invitation to be delivered to Miss Kingston to invite her to tea.”

“And there is no way I can persuade you out of this?” Henry asked, sitting back in the chair. He could feel a tightening in his chest, partly fearing seeing Miss Kingston again, and partly longing for it. *That is not a good thing!*

“No chance at all,” Catherine said smiling. “Now, drink up your tea, dear.”

Henry snapped up the cup, angered that everything seemed to be out of his control, just as Lord Hector made an appearance of hiding his laugh behind his teacup.

Sarah set about preparing her next canvas. She whitewashed it first then moved the easel so that it was in the sunshine filtering in from

the window, then she set to work. With the sketch open she had been making of the view of Swanage overlooking the rockpools, she slowly began to paint in the scenery.

She began with the rockpools first, then the cliff and the banks beside them, right down to the ocean that rippled in every so often, casting foam over the sand. Little by little, the scene began to appear. Once the sun was set in the picture, with just a few wispy clouds in the corner of the canvas to complete the look, she moved her focus down to the last thing she had added to the sketch.

It was the figure of Lord Lakefield walking across the rockpools. For a minute, Sarah chewed her lip, debating whether or not to put him in it, but deciding the painting lacked focus without him, she set about putting him in again. As before, she was careful to paint him from the back only, so that it was impossible to really be certain who it was.

“I know who it is though,” she mumbled to herself.

“What’s that dear?”

Sarah jumped in her seat, swiveling on the stool to see her mother was standing in the doorway to the drawing room with some unopened letters in her hand.

“Nothing.” Sarah brought a smile to her cheeks, trying to cover up her unease. “I am simply talking to myself about my painting.”

She added a few more flecks to the figure, painting in the brown hair and the way his jacket was slung over his arm, before she grew aware of Anne moving to her side.

“Well, I’d say that is one of your finest paintings.”

“Thank you, mother. That is very kind.”

“Who is that?” she asked, pointing at the figure. Sarah’s hand holding the paintbrush fell still and hovered over the painting.

“It is just someone I saw walking the bay today. That is all.” She supposed it wasn’t a complete lie.

“What a fine figure he cuts across your painting,” Anne said with a soft chuckle.

“Yes, I suppose he does,” Sarah said before sighing and sitting back in the chair. She couldn’t understand why she had allowed herself to flirt with him when she saw him, it had just been too easy. The whole meeting had been nerve-wracking, awkward, and heartbreaking, yet she had flirted as well!

“Do we know anyone staying at the inn in town?” Anne asked. Sarah turned in the seat once more, only able to think of one person.

“Why do you ask?” she asked, hurriedly placing her paintbrush and palette down on a nearby table.

“We have a letter from the inn,” Anne explained as she opened the letter. Sarah held her breath, waiting to see what it could be as Anne’s eyes danced across the parchment. “Oh, it is from Lady Lamptonshire! I remember her.” The way her mother’s eyes lit up brought happiness to Sarah, even if it was for only a brief moment. Her mother had managed to remember someone from their past without need of prompting or reminding. “She has invited us to tea with her, and her nephew. She has invited your friend, Miss Hampshrie as well.”

“Wait, her nephew?” Sarah said, feeling her mouth go dry. “Lord Lakefield will be there?” *Why would he invite me after our awkward meeting!?*

“It would seem so. Oh, I cannot wait.”

“What? Mama, no, we cannot go.”

“Why not?” Anne asked, moving one hand to hold on her hip in clear irritation.

“Because we should be avoiding people!”

“It is one small tea party with old friends, Sarah. I am sure nothing will come of it.”

Sarah was not so sure.

Chapter 8

“That’s a hit!” Henry called as he lowered the shotgun. As though in response to his words, the gamekeeper’s dog bounded through the undergrowth, heading straight for the pigeon that had been shot down from the sky.

“We were supposed to leave ten minutes ago,” Lord Hector said from behind him, with the shot gun made safe and slung across his arm.

“Ten more minutes will be fine,” Henry said, aiming at the sky another time. As the dog bounded between the trees, it startled more of the birds and another pigeon went up. He fired, but this time, missed.

“You wouldn’t by any chance be avoiding going back to the inn, would you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Henry lied. When the innkeeper suggested that the gamekeeper could take them shooting on a nearby estate that day, Henry had jumped at the chance, partly for the want of a distraction from his thoughts, and partly to make him late for the tea party his aunt was going to hold.

“You know very well what I mean,” Lord Hector said with a soft chuckle.

“You know, I didn’t tease you anywhere near this much when you met Lady Dianne Minnow. I wish I had done now.” He lifted the gun another time.

“Ah! So do you intend to marry Miss Kingston too?”

Henry fired the gun in the sky then turned and set a dark glare at his friend.

“Why do I have a horrible feeling you might turn that weapon on me?” Lord Hector asked with a smile.

“Don’t tempt me,” Henry jested. “Now, stop it so much with all your teasing.”

“Well, I’m certainly having fun.”

“Can’t you tell I am not?”

“All right, jesting aside –”

“Are you capable of that?” Henry asked, earning a shake of the head from Lord Hector in reply.

“Jesting aside, we promised your aunt we would be back in time for the tea, and we are calling it fine as it is,” Lord Hector said plainly. The truth of the matter was making Henry shift uncomfortably between his feet, pushing his boots around the grass blades. “Your guests are due very soon.”

“Yes, I know,” Henry said sadly before turning to see the gamekeeper calling the dog back.

The reply to his aunt’s message had come late the night before. When the note came, detailing that Lady Anne Kingston, Miss Sarah Kingston, and Miss Rebecca Hampshire were to visit, but there was no mention of Lord Kingston, Henry had been surprised at first, until his aunt revealed that he had passed away.

“How do you know that, aunt?” Henry had asked her in surprise, looking up from their dinner. She had merely shrugged and said she’d read of it in a letter of a mutual acquaintance of theirs. Henry made note to give his commiserations to Miss Kingston when he saw her, feeling guilty he had not done it the day before.

“So? Can we go now?” Lord Hector asked, bumping Henry’s shoulder in the effort to make him leave.

“I am sure Miss Kingston would prefer it if I were not there,” Henry said as he reloaded the gun, ready to take his next fire.

“You do not know that,” Lord Hector said, adopting a more serious tone than he usually did. The night before, Henry had told Lord Hector everything about what had happened between him and Miss Kingston, right down to the words she had used when she ran away from him, into her carriage, and disappeared forever more.

“You do not know the opposite either,” Henry said pointedly, earning arched eyebrows from Lord Hector.

When more pigeons jumped up from the trees, Henry lifted the shotgun and fired. This time, he got the shot, taking one of them down. The black Labrador barked and hurried off after it.

“Right, we have given that dog enough exercise for one day. Please, Henry, let’s go.” Lord Hector pulled on the back of his jacket, eagerly dragging him away. Henry made the gun safe as he reluctantly followed.

“I still think this is a bad idea.”

“Why? Because you despised her company so much yesterday?”

“I did not despise it! I…” Henry trailed off, realizing what he had been about to say.

“You…?” Lord Hector prompted him on. “You what? You were going to say something.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Henry said and passed his shotgun to the gamekeeper before they walked away across the grounds, heading back toward the inn. “Let us talk about you instead for a change.”

“Me? I find the subject of you much more entertaining right now.”

“I do not, so, tell me about the preparations for your wedding instead.” Henry was pleased to see his prompt had worked. Lord Hector rattled off lots of descriptions of the preparations, including Lady Dianne Minnow’s upset that the church where she wanted to get married was no longer available.

Henry happily listened as they crossed the grounds, up until they reached the top of a banking hill that overlooked the front of the inn and where it met the busy roads of the back of the town. As they slowly descended the hill path, Henry’s eyes were drawn down to those roads, where he could see a cluster of three people walking together.

His stomach lurched when he recognized her. Miss Kingston was easy to spot with her dark auburn hair bundled tightly at the back of her head. With the breeze that buffeted across the bay, it teased a few curls to fall loose out of her chignon and hang down the back of her neck. She couldn’t see he was watching her. Her gaze was far too fixed on the inn up ahead that she was walking toward with her mother and

friend. There was something private and intimate about one brief stolen moment gazing upon her, before she disappeared inside.

“Well, your aunt will be upset with us now,” Lord Hector said as he picked up his pace and hurried down the hill more.

“Why?” Henry asked, following him.

“Because our guests have beaten us to the inn, and don’t pretend you hadn’t noticed. You were staring at her.”

“I was not staring!”

Yet Lord Hector merely chuckled in reply.

As they entered the inn and walked toward the sitting room, Henry eagerly removed his jacket. The heat of the day was beginning to grow cloying and for some reason he was becoming more and more flustered the closer he got to the sitting room.

“Should I splash you with cold water before we go in?” Lord Hector asked as they hovered by the closed door.

“Remind me again why you are my friend?” Henry asked.

“I point out the folly of your ways. We all need someone to remind us to laugh at ourselves every now and then.” Lord Hector’s words brought a soft laugh to Henry before he opened the door and walked in. “Ah, Lady Lamptonshire, I apologize for our lateness.”

“I sincerely hope you do,” Catherine’s voice came clearly from inside. “Come in now, our guests have beaten you here.”

She stood in the center of the room and beckoned them forward, taking up most of the space between the chesterfield and rococo settees. As Henry followed her hand, his eyes slipped to where their guests were standing. Miss Hampshire and Lady Kingston were standing by one settee, curtsying to them. On the other side with a spare space beside her, Miss Kingston was curtsying, apparently trying to avoid his gaze entirely.

She was dressed finely today, in a pastel yellow gown that contrasted her dark hair beautifully. Cinched high on the waist, Henry found his eyes slipping down to admire her figure before forcing them back to

her face. *I do not even have control of my eyes anymore!*

“Lord Hector, you will not have yet met Lady Anne Kingston.” Catherine began the introductions. Henry followed, first taking Lady Kingston’s hand.

“How are you, Lady Kingston?” he asked, observing she seemed older than just the two years difference should have accounted for.

“I am well, my Lord, though it is so good to see a familiar face,” she said with a deep smile. “And yourself?”

“I am well,” he said automatically, not feeling remotely well whilst he was aware of Miss Kingston’s eyes upon him from the other side of the coffee table.

“Ah, here is our tea. Come in, Sophie,” Catherine addressed the maid who had just walked through the door. “Place them here for everyone.” Tea, coffee, cakes and sandwiches were all brought in and stacked upon a table. As Henry moved toward a chair beside Lord Hector, he felt a firm jab in his back. He barely had time to respond before he realized it was Catherine pushing him toward the empty space beside Miss Kingston. There was no way he could object without causing a scene, so he reluctantly sat down and shared an uneasy smile with Miss Kingston.

This will be a tortuous couple of hours!

Sarah had barely taken her eyes of Lord Lakefield since he had sat down beside her. He had clearly been shooting that day and with his shirt sleeves rolled up and his jacket off, the clear athleticism was plain to see, making her more and more uncomfortable, alarmed that she could still be so attracted to him after all this time away.

At first, she and Lord Lakefield barely said anything to each other at all, merely a word at a time as sandwiches and cakes were passed back and forth, but when Lord Hector suggested a game of cards between the four of them, conversation bloomed. With Lord Hector, Rebecca, Lord Lakefield and Sarah all sat at a table of four, with their focus on the cards rather than the past, awkwardness seemed to fade away.

“You cannot play that card, Miss Kingston,” Lord Lakefield said, pushing the card back toward her.

“Why on earth not?” she asked, remembering when he had said such things to her in the past. “It is a fair card.” They were playing cribbage, which was not her finest game. She took hold of the card and pushed it toward the center of the table again.

“Yes, but if you play it, then Lord Hector here will be able to create fifteen and we will all lose the game within minutes.” He offered a smile as he pushed the card forward another time. On this occasion, their fingers brushed together with the movement. She expected him to look sharply away, or to at least retract his fingers, as though burned by the touch, but he did not. He held it.

“You know I am hopeless at this game,” she said with narrowed eyes.

“I remember very well. I do not think you ever won a game that you and I played.”

“Oh! You are bold indeed today. Is it not possible I have improved since you and I last met?” she asked, tilting her head to the side, watching as he mirrored the action.

“Most certainly.” The deepness of his tone suggested they were not just talking about cribbage anymore. “But…if you play that card then you most certainly have not improved at cribbage.”

“Cruel man,” she teased him and snapped the card away from under his grasp. He retracted his hand then, chuckling at her and pretending to be injured by her snapping it away so quickly.

She perused her cards, debating what else to play, though in truth she could think of nothing. She chewed her lip for a little longer as she stared at the cards.

“Oh, Sarah, do play,” Rebecca pleaded sat opposite her. “I am already craving another cup of tea and can’t get it until we finish this round.”

“I will bring tea to you, Miss Hampshire,” Catherine called kindly from the settee nearby.

“I do not know what to play. Lord Lakefield has made me nervous now.” Sarah sent him a falsely dark glare as though she were truly

irked at his interference.

“I could help you make your choice,” he offered, leaning toward her.

“That is cheating to look at another player’s cards,” Lord Hector said decisively.

“And how often do you cheat at this game?” Lord Lakefield asked.

“Fair point.” His friend chuckled. “Very well, you can look at her cards.”

Sarah leaned forward on the table just as Lord Lakefield leaned toward her. She was acutely away of the brush of his arm against hers. Without a long sleeve, her arm was bare, and she could just feel the cotton of his shirt teasing her gently. Aware of what it was doing to her, she bent her head more toward her cards, hoping she could hide her blush.

“Ah, for starters, you are holding them in a difficult order,” Lord Lakefield said. He reached forward and began to move her cards in her hand, rearranging them.

“I like my order!” she declared confidently, trying to switch them back. In the kerfuffle, their hands kept bumping together. She liked it. She especially liked the way he didn’t retreat from her. “Oh, you are interfering.”

“You interfere as much when we used to play draughts.” He reminded her of their past discussions. “I can remember you moving my pieces around the board for me.”

“Well, you were hopeless at the game,” she said, smiling at him, abruptly realizing how close they were sitting to one another.

“So, we are both skilled at different games.” He smiled back at her as he moved the cards. “Trust me. Play that card, and you will win some points.” He tapped one of the cards in her hand. She picked it up and placed it down, uncertain as to how she had won points at all.

“Oh, two points!” Rebecca declared, clearly impressed as she added the points to Sarah’s score.

“You’re cheating and helping her to win. I would like to submit a

formal complaint," Lord Hector said.

"Complaint heard and ignored," Sarah said, smiling back at him and earning a chuckle. As the play continued with Lord Hector's turn, Sarah was aware that Lord Lakefield had not moved back away from her. They were both still leaning on the table in such a way that their arms were touching.

"Oh, I have to say how lovely it is to see you both again," Lady Lamptonshire said, clearly addressing Anne as she stood to her feet and began to bring more cups of tea over to the card table.

"As it is to see you," Anne said kindly, following her with the cups.

"It is as though we have never been apart, wouldn't you say, Henry?" Lady Lamptonshire addressed her nephew as she placed a cup of tea down in front of him.

Lord Lakefield immediately retreated from his position, leaning away and creating space between him and Sarah. She couldn't help being saddened at the loss of his touch against her arm.

"Two years is a long time, Aunt." Lord Lakefield's words made Sarah hang her hand, pretending to be focused on her cards rather than the sadness that bloomed in her chest at his statement.

Chapter 9

“Mother, I am certain it is going to rain, we should really begin to make our way home.” Miss Kingston had made the excuse for what had to be the second time now.

Henry looked at her from the card table where he was still sat. She had stood, walked away from him and gone straight to her mother, pleading it was time to go. Henry tried his best not to let his eyes follow her across the room, but it was impossible. Spending so long with her over tea made the matter plain – she was still beautiful, and yet had matured in the time that they were apart.

“Nonsense,” Lady Kingston said. “A few more minutes will be fine. There is barely a cloud in the sky.”

“How can you say that? It is grey out!”

“Is it?” Lady Kingston seemed startled by the idea, turning to the window. “Well, I am confident we will still be fine, Sarah. Have another cup of tea.”

“Subtle,” Lord Hector whispered to Henry as the two of them packed up the cards.

“Hmm,” Henry mumbled in agreement. Miss Kingston’s effort to make any excuse to leave was easy to see. It made Henry restless and fiddle with the pack of cards, had he been the one to make her want to leave? All because he had retreated from her? It was possible.

“I have had quite enough tea today, thank you,” Miss Kingston said, taking a seat near her mother and keeping her eyes firmly away from the card table. Henry couldn’t stand it. They had gone from flirtation to ignoring each other in a matter of seconds. Even if a part of his brain knew it was a bad idea, his body seemed not to listen as he stood from the card table and walked back toward the settees, taking a seat firmly beside Miss Kingston. She looked up sharply in surprise at him coming so close.

“Well, I see your cribbage game has not much improved since I last saw you,” he said, seeing the opportunity to tease her. It worked well, for she angled her body more toward him with her lips parted, ready to argue. “So, you are not spending your days playing cards. What is it

you do with yourself these days?"

"Oh, I…I go walking with Rebecca a lot," Miss Kingston said, gesturing to Miss Hampshire who had come to take a seat beside Lady Kingston on her other side.

"She paints and sketches most days too," Lady Kingston said smoothly. "Scarcely is there a day when our sitting room isn't full of paintings. I slipped one day for there were so many errant sketches lying on the floor."

"Why were they on the floor?" Henry asked with a smile.

"I had discarded them for they weren't good enough," Miss Kingston said quietly.

"You used to paint a little," Henry said in thought. "Have you turned into quite an artist these days then?"

"No, not at all –" Miss Kingston said hurriedly, though she did not get far before she was cut off by her friend.

"Oh, she is, she is just being modest," Miss Hampshire said as she helped herself to another cup of tea, clearly having no intention of letting Miss Kingston escape them as soon as she wished to. "She makes my sketches look like a children's scrawl."

Henry remembered back to the sketchbook he had picked up on the beach. He hadn't held it in his grasp for long enough to really analyze the skill of the sketcher. He had just been so startled when he realized who the sketchbook belonged to that he had been thinking much more of who the figure was that she was drawing on the beach.

"She is painting a fine piece at the moment," Lady Kingston said with great admiration.

"Is that the one on the rockpools?" Miss Hampshire asked.

"That's the one," Miss Kingston answered quickly. "Just a landscape of Swanage Bay."

"Really? I could have sworn there was a figure in the painting," Lady Kingston said distractedly. Miss Kingston snapped her head up and pinned her gaze to her mother.

“No, there isn’t.”

“No, I am quite certain there is, dear,” Lady Kingston said. “Oh, Lady Lamptonshire, you should see her paintings. They would not look out of place on a wall in a fine house. It’s a wonder my walls are not all splattered with paint.”

“What a delightful idea!” Catherine said with such animation that it seemed to surprise them all. “I really must come to see you one of these days whilst we are in town. I would dearly love to see your paintings.”

“Oh no, my Lady, I am sure they would not interest you,” Miss Kingston said, animatedly moving to the edge of the seat.

“Nonsense, I am a great lover of art!” Catherine said with a chuckle.

“Are you?” Henry asked with a smirk, for it was news to him. “You called Somerset House gallery a poorer walk than the park.”

“Well, you do not know everything about me, Henry. I could be a secret lover of art for all you know.”

Henry doubted it somehow. It made him frown over his teacup at his aunt, wondering what she was up to.

“I do like that scene over Swanage Bay with the person in it, Sarah.” Lady Kingston was talking of the painting again. Henry did notmiss the way it made Miss Kingston wriggle in her seat, uncomfortable. The wriggling brought their legs close together, so near that he felt goosebumps form ridges across his skin.

He began to think it was not such a good idea to torment himself by sitting beside her after all.

“Who is the person in the painting?” Henry found the question fell from his lips before he could stop it. Miss Kingston looked at him with those striking green eyes growing wide. She didn’t answer for a second, but she held his gaze, a gaze he was not going to look away from. “Have I said something odd?” he asked after a minute, breaking the silence.

“It’s just…you cannot see the figure’s face.”

“I rather think she did that on purpose,” Miss Hampshire said before hiding a smile before a teacup. Miss Kingston whipped her head round and offered a glare in reprimand, but Miss Hampshire just continued to smile.

“Why would you do that?” Henry asked, wanting to know more.

“I didn’t want it to be a specific person, just an idea of someone walking across the bay, that is all.” Miss Kingston stood to her feet so suddenly that Henry reared back in surprise. He was not the only one, for Lady Kingston and Rebecca had reared back too. “Mother, it really is going to rain soon. We must go.”

“Oh, very well dear, if you insist.”

As the ladies prepared to leave, Catherine it seemed was not going to let her last comments lie.

“I promise I will come to see you this week. I cannot wait to see those lovely paintings of yours.”

“You are too kind, my Lady, it is not necessary,” Miss Kingston said hurriedly as they hovered by the door.

“Nonsense, wild horses couldn’t keep me away,” Catherine said with a smile.

“If only we didn’t have an injured horse, then we would be far away,” Henry muttered to himself, not having realized Lord Hector had moved to his side.

“Apparently our horse may have an infection now. No chance of leaving at all for a good while,” Lord Hector said, smiling.

“That is grave news for our horse. So why are you smiling?”

“No reason,” Lord Hector said, stepping away.

“Well, good day to you all.” Lady Kingston began the goodbyes. As Henry stood to his feet and did the rounds, he saved his last goodbye for Miss Kingston, bowing to her though he kept his eyes on her, unable to lower them with the bow. She curtsied and held his gaze too. It was a long look between them, reminding him of the kind of

gazes they used to give each other across crowded rooms at assemblies.

“Good day, Lord Lakefield,” she said and turned, hurrying out of the room so quickly that he barely had chance to return the pleasantry.

Once the ladies were gone, Henry didn’t move for a minute. He stayed exactly where he was, staring at the door through which Miss Kingston had left.

“You are looking longingly at the door, my friend,” Lord Hector said, clapping him on the shoulder. The move seemed to break a kind of spell and Henry stepped away.

“I am not,” he said quietly. “Aunt, I wish you had not invited them for tea.”

“Why in heavens not?” Catherine said with a smirk as she picked up the last cake from their tea tray, going at it with a tiny cake fork. “You seemed very happy in Miss Kingston’s company when you were playing cards. Chatting sweetly like the old days. Lord Hector, did you see the way they were leaning toward each other?”

“That I did,” Lord Hector said, sitting down beside her. “I also saw the way he seemed to make an excuse to bump her arm every now and then.”

“Oh, I say.” Catherine made a shocked sound, as though it were a great scandal indeed.

“Aunt, please…” Henry began and pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration, yet words failed him.

“Why are you so upset?” she asked astutely, making him drop his hand and look up again.

“I am not,” he lied. He shifted between his feet, trying to come up with some convincing words. “It is just…it is torment to be here, Aunt. Let us leave it at that.”

“Torment? Oh my, a strong word indeed,” Catherine said as she polished off the last of her cake. Henry turned and walked away, about to leave the room and this conversation. “Are you still in love with her then?” Catherine’s question brought him so short that he

tripped on the rug and nearly fell on his face. Once he gathered himself, he turned back, finding his face was turning red.

“Aunt, we do not talk about things so openly,” Henry said quietly, watching as Lord Hector busied himself with trying to clear the teacups, trying to stifle a laugh.

“Don’t we? I do.” She sat a little straighter and waved her little fork in his direction. “That was also not a denial Henry.”

“Well, this one is.” He stood a little taller and fixed his aunt with an intense stare. “No, I do not love her anymore.” He turned and walked out, not giving her the chance to say anything again about Miss Kingston or the idea of love.

“I told you it would rain,” Sarah said rather miserably as they began to walk through the streets of Swanage back home. It had been sunny for days with the height of summer upon them, but that heat had now been broken into the heavy downpour that was coming down overhead. Within seconds, Sarah felt drenched. The skirt of her gown was sticking to her legs and the tendrils from her updo were sticking to the back of her neck.

“Oh my,” Rebecca said, hurrying alongside her. “I rather feel like a drowned mouse. Do I look like one, by any chance?” She giggled. Sarah appraised Rebecca with her own sodden gown, water streaking her face and running off her bonnet.

“I would like to say you did not, but well…” Sarah trailed off, making Rebecca laugh all the more.

“Oh, isn’t it lovely?” Anne said from behind them, dallying in the rain. “I cannot remember the last time I went walking in the rain.”

“It’s because you will catch cold!” Sarah called back to her mother, hurrying down toward the promenade with Rebecca at her side, leaving her mother to catch up. “I think my mother has taken leave of her senses entirely,” she whispered to her friend.

“Not at all. It is simply that she is in such a good mood that her good mood cannot be spoiled, even by a little rain,” Rebecca said, gesturing to the heavens.

“Thisis a little rain?” Sarah scoffed, holding out her hands as the rain came down in heavy and fast globules, bouncing off her palms to cause splatters.

“It is but a light shower.”

Before Sarah could argue the contrary, there was a roll of thunder overhead that brought the three women to a stop on the edge of the promenade beside the beach.

“A light shower!?” Sarah repeated, gesturing to the sky once again.

“Very well, a heavy shower,” Rebecca said as they walked forward, their pace a little quicker this time. “You cannot blame your mother for being in a good mood. You seemed in an equally good mood too for a while over tea.”

“I was enjoying my cup of tea,” Sarah said through gritted teeth, unwilling to entertain the conversation that Rebecca clearly wanted to have. She picked up her pace, making her walk across the promenade even faster than before.

“Yes, because a cup of tea is capable of producing such ridiculous smiles on our faces, isn’t it?” Rebecca’s question was met by a glower, but she seemed to barely notice. “Oh, Sarah, let us be serious for a minute. I have never seen you like this before.”

“Like what?” Sarah asked, glancing back to check on her mother. Anne was walking a little distance behind them, looking thoroughly happy. She was probably pleased to have spent time with old friends after they had put their family in exile for such a long time.

“For one thing, this jumpy and restless when I allude to you smiling,” Rebecca said, pointing to Sarah’s face. Sarah paid extra care to not let any trace of a smile enter her features. “For another, I have never seen you flirt before. It was rather entertaining.”

“I was not flirting. And what do you mean by entertaining? Was it bad?”

“Ha! So you were flirting?”

“Rebecca!” Sarah said, waving her hands at her friend in objection.

“Calm yourself, Sarah,” Rebecca said, taking her arm and looping the two together. As they walked down the promenade the rain fell and made puddles around their feet. Nearby, others were running indoors, but despite Sarah’s quick speed in the attempt to also do the same, Rebecca was slowing her pace, as was Anne, by trailing at the back.

“I do not wish to speak about what just happened, Rebecca, please,” Sarah said softly.

“Very well, if that is what you wish, then of course, we will abide by it, but may I make just one remark first? Then I promise not to bring up the subject again until you do.”

“I suppose that is a fair deal. What is your question?” Sarah asked.

“Do you remember before you said it was not possible for you to still be in love with someone you hadn’t seen for two years?”

“Yes, I remember.” She could recall their conversation down by the rockpools all too easily.

“Well, I have decided that you are quite wrong. It is perfectly possible.”

“What do you mean by that?” Sarah asked, pulling on her friend’s arm so that they came to a sudden stop, landing in a puddle.

“I mean that you are obviously in love with him still, Sarah.”

“I am not!” Sarah objected.

“There, I have said my piece, and I promised now to talk about something else. Shall we talk about the weather? It’s what most people do, isn’t it? Though there isn’t much we can say today other than it being a deluge.” Rebecca gestured to the sky. For a minute, Sarah stayed silent, unable to say anything. When she broke the silence, she certainly didn’t speak about the weather.

“Did I really appear to still be in love with him?” she asked, having to raise her voice to be heard above the rain as it came down harder.

“Ah, as you have brought up the topic again, I suppose I am now at liberty to speak of it too,” Rebecca said with a smile. “To my mind,

you certainly did."

"Oh, good lord!" Sarah panicked and looked out across the ocean. With the downpour, it was difficult to see where the sky ended, and the sea began. "Do you think Lord Lakefield noticed?"

"That you are in love with him?"

"That I *appeared* to be. I never confessed to loving him."

"I doubt he saw it. He seemed too absorbed in flirting with you himself. I have decided that he must be in love with you too."

These words brought Sarah to another stop as she fixed Rebecca with her full attention.

"You think he loves me?"

"I would wager good money on it," Rebecca said with glee. "I thought this news would make you happy, but it has not."

"If it is possible…if it is remotely possible that he loves me, then I cannot allow that."

"Why not?"

"Because I am a ruined woman, Rebecca, remember?" Sarah said with feeling. She was tempted to cry with the words, but the sky seemed to be shedding enough tears without her adding to the mix. "We cannot allow a connection to take place. It would risk his reputation. His own standing in society could be ruined. No, from now on, I must stay away. No matter how long he is here in Swanage, I must avoid him."

Chapter 10

“Corfe Castle, that has to be it,” Catherine said decisively as she pulled down the newspaper Henry was holding in front of his face, pretending to be interested in it.

“What does?” Henry asked distractedly. He’d been attempting to read about the latest turns with the stocks in London when his mind had happily slipped to Miss Kingston, meaning he had paid no attention to what he was reading, and even less attention to whatever discussion was happening between his aunt and Lord Hector.

“My trip today. I wish to see the landscape of where we are staying, and Lady Kingston told me yesterday about an old, ruined castle nearby that was destroyed in the civil war. Apparently, there is no finer view around than at Corfe Castle. It should be a lovely excursion for today,” Catherine said with delight, pulling the newspaper away. Henry took hold of the newspaper before it could get very far and lifted it back in front of his face.

“I hope you enjoy your trip, Aunt,” Henry said, returning his focus to the paper.

“I cannot go alone, Henry.”

“Well, I shall offer to escort you, Lady Lamptonshire.” Lord Hector’s words made Henry peer over the edge of his newspaper to see Lord Hector eagerly digging into another brioche bun taken from the center of the table. “A wander round a castle sounds like a lovely way to enjoy this weather.” Beyond the windows, the sky was blue once again with a strong white sun. After the storm of the night before, the sky had cleared behind it.

“How lovely, thank you, Lord Hector, but I cannot go unless my nephew comes too.”

“Oh, I see.” Lord Hector put upon a dramatic countenance and laid a hand to his heart, as though he had been wounded. “My company is not good enough to escort you?”

“You know it is,” Catherine said, chuckling at his display. “But I am eager for Henry to come too. Henry? Please do say you will come?”

“Only if you promise me a moment’s peace with my paper first,” Henry said, lifting it again.

“Very well, we are in agreement.” Catherine made an appearance of closing her lips tightly.

“Speaking of which, you have been reading the same page for the last fifteen minutes.” Lord Hector leaned forward, as though trying to read the paper too.

“That’s because I keep being interrupted,” Henry said distractedly.

“Nothing else on your mind then?” Lord Hector asked, his voice teasing.

“Nothing else at all,” Henry said tartly, and brought the paper up even higher than before, determined to block out any glimpse of Lord Hector smirking at him.

“Why is the carriage going this way, Aunt?” Henry asked, as the coach turned down the main streets of town. “I thought you said Corfe Castle was out of town.”

“It is, I just wanted to see more of Swanage first,” Catherine said, turning her focus out of the window. Henry frowned as he stared at her back, certain something was afoot, but without any guesses, he was forced to sit back in the seat and look at Lord Hector across the carriage.

“What horses are pulling the carriage?” Henry asked.

“Our uninjured horse and one we borrowed from the stable at the inn.”

“How strange, I could have sworn it was the same horse,” Henry said drily.

“Both large chestnuts, isn’t that a coincidence?” Lord Hector asked with a small laugh.

“Yes…a great coincidence,” Henry said with a shake of his head.

Quiet descended between the three of them for a while as they moved through town. With the position of the carriage, Henry was able to turn his gaze out to the ocean, glimpsing it every now and then between the houses. It was clear soon that they were banking up a hill, leaving the very center of town a little behind him.

“Are we leaving town at last?” he asked.

“Something like that,” Catherine said, as the carriage came to a stop. “Ah, here we are. This is perfect.”

The carriage door was opened, and a footman helped Catherine down. Through the open doorway, Henry was finally offered a view of where it was that they had come. It was to a small cottage that overlooked the bay. With a stone frontage and a tiled roof, it was quite idyllic, if a little small perhaps. Out the front of the house, the garden was well kept, with tall white hollyhocks and purple sea thistles on the other.

“Where are we?” Henry asked, just as Lord Hector leaned forward as well to peer out the door. Catherine turned on the pathway, looking at Henry with an expression that suggested he was a fool.

“Can you not remember my conversation with Miss Kingston yesterday?”

“What conversation?” Henry asked warily.

“I said I would stop by to see some of her paintings. Well, we were passing –”

“Detouring,” Lord Hector corrected her.

“You are not helping,” she said, pointing at Lord Hector who dutifully appeared admonished and sat back in his seat again, staying quiet. “I will simply pop into see her paintings and will be out again in a minute. I promise not to be long, you two can stay there. Within five minutes, we will be on our way.”

Catherine turned and headed up the path before Henry could make any objection. His gaze flitted to the window, half expecting to see Miss Kingston there. When a shadow moved across the grass, he jerked back in the carriage, fearing she had seen them.

“You are as jumpy as I was when I met Dianne.” Lord Hector’s

comment was just met by a frown.

Sarah had not been expecting any visitors. Least of all had she expected Lady Lamptonshire to bustle into the cottage, full of energy so early in the morning.

“Ah, there you are, Miss Kingston, Lady Kingston,” she curtsied as the two of them stood from their places in the sitting room. Anne had been sat resting in a chair as she read one of her old favorite books, whilst Sarah had been working on her painting that overlooked the rockpools.

“Lady Lamptonshire. What an unexpected pleasure! To what do we owe the surprise?” Anne hurried forward, beckoning her in. “Do, come sit down. I can request some tea.”

“Oh, I mustn’t stay long,” Lady Lamptonshire said, though she followed Anne despite her words and took a seat beside her in the room. “Henry and Lord Hector are waiting in the carriage for me. We are all set to go on a little venture to Corfe Castle today.”

The mention of Lord Lakefield made Sarah snap her head toward the window, seeing the outline of the carriage beyond the glass.

“I just wanted to stop by today to see your paintings, Miss Kingston,” Lady Lamptonshire said, turning toward Sarah in her chair. “Well, even from here I can see what you are working on.”

Sarah’s hands trembled with realization that Lady Lamptonshire could not only see the landscape painting, but had a perfect view of the figure she had painted in. She clenched her fingers around the paintbrushes, praying that no one would call attention to the similarities of the back of the figure and Lord Lakefield.

“Oh my, you are a skilled artist indeed,” Lady Lamptonshire said kindly.

“Thank you,” Sarah said, smiling a little as she retook her stool in front of the easel.

“What a beautiful view it is that you have created over Swanage Bay. I see what you meant yesterday, Lady Kingston, about the figure in the

painting too." Lady Lamptonshire moved to her feet and came to stand directly in front of the canvas.

Sarah was tempted to tear the canvas down and throw it out of the nearest window, all to avoid the conversation she knew was coming next.

"At second glance, I think there is something familiar in the gentleman you have painted," Lady Lamptonshire said softly, though there was no artfulness in her tone, just pure observation.

"It just happened to be a stranger walking across the beach," Sarah said tightly. "I thought he completed the composition very well."

"Very well indeed," Lady Lamptonshire confirmed as she stepped closer to the painting. "I can't help but wonder if there is something else missing in the painting."

"Oh? What is that?" Sarah asked worriedly, frowning and leaning toward the painting.

"Your poor fellow looks lonely. You should paint him in a friend, or a young lady on his arm, anyone to give him some company."

The words made Sarah reassess the painting, frowning a little more at it. Lord Lakefield did look a little lonely in the painting. Perhaps Lady Lamptonshire's idea was quite a good one.

"Well, you are a fine artist indeed, Miss Kingston," Lady Lamptonshire said as she stepped back from the painting. "I only wish I could stay longer to look at more of them, but I have promised my nephew that we would go to the castle today. What a shame it is, for I would love to talk more to you about your art. Oh…I know. I have just had a marvelous idea!"

"Go on, Lady Lamptonshire," Anne said as she walked toward them from across the room.

"Miss Kingston, what do you say to accompanying our little party up to the castle?" Lady Lamptonshire said with glee in her tone. "We may talk at length about your paintings then."

"I…erm…" Sarah struggled for words as she stared at the two women before her. Refusing would be rude but accepting would mean

travelling in a carriage with Lord Lakefield and then walking around Corfe Castle with him. She seriously considered coming up with an excuse in order to refuse Lady Lamptonshire, but behind the older lady's back, Anne widened her eyes and made a hand gesture. It was a clear silent sign to accept the invitation. "I would be delighted, my Lady," Sarah said, capitulating in the end.

"How wonderful!" Lady Lamptonshire clapped her hands together.

"Quick, Sarah, off with your painting apron." Anne hustled Sarah to her feet and removed the painting apron from over her gown. She considered changing, but she only had time to check her appearance in the mirror once before Anne passed her reticule into her hand and Lady Lamptonshire hurried her out of the door.

"Mother," Sarah hovered just beyond the doorway, having one brief moment to whisper a few words to her mother. "Is this really such a good idea?"

"Why would it not be, dear? You love the castle." The way Anne spoke suggested to Sarah that she was struggling to remember the past once more.

"Come on, Miss Kingston, do not keep us waiting. I am quite impatient to see this castle, you must forgive me!" Lady Lamptonshire's beckon meant Sarah did not have time now to explain the past yet again to her mother. They simply said their hurried goodbyes then Sarah hurried down the pathway, out to the carriage ahead.

Lady Lamptonshire climbed in first, then the footman helped Sarah up next. As she took a seat beside Lady Lamptonshire, it was clear to see from the look of shock on Lord Lakefield's face sitting opposite her that he had not expected her to make an appearance at all.

"Your Aunt was very kind to extend an invitation to me," Sarah said before any other words could be uttered. She didn't want him to think that she had tried to worm her own way into the trip.

"Of course, she did," Henry said, offering a look to his aunt that Lady Lamptonshire appeared not to notice. "Did you see Miss Kingston's paintings, Aunt?" he asked suspiciously.

"Just the one," she said. "We didn't have time for anymore, but I saw the lovely painting we were speaking of yesterday. The one

overlooking the rockpools of Swanage Bay with the figure walking across."

Sarah felt her cheeks blush as she turned her gaze out of the window, praying that Lady Lamptonshire wouldn't mention anything about the figure looking like Lord Lakefield. Fortunately, Sarah finally seemed to be having a little bit of luck, for she didn't go on.

"Well, I hope you have come ready for a rather animated walk round the castle, Miss Kingston." Lord Lakefield's words urged her to look back at him, as she tried to fight the blush in her cheeks. "My Aunt seems quite determined to see every part of the castle there is to see."

"I am sure I can keep up," Sarah said. Seeing the way Lord Lakefield was looking at her, she found it impossible not to tease him. "You may remember, there was a time when I could even outrace you when we went walking. Do you not remember when we went to Lullingston Castle?"

"How could I forget," he said with a smile. "You hurried round so fast, I still wonder if you actually saw any of it." She smiled too, remembering what a lovely day it had been. It was one of the memories that she now treasured. "I had to run to catch up with you."

"You did not!"

"Well, I practically had to," he said with a small laugh. "That was until you twisted your ankle on the last stretch, and I had to carry you back to the carriage."

"I could have walked fine by myself. You were just…"

"Just…?" he prompted on.

"I do not know really. I am going to say you were eager to help," she said, watching his reaction closely.

"Oh, I was certainly eager." The words left a crackle in the air that made Sarah's breath hitch. She had not been in the carriage a couple of minutes and had already fallen into flirting with Lord Lakefield. It was just too easy to do, and far too natural. She had to stop it, before anymore could be said.

"Lady Lamptonshire, do tell me about your upcoming trip to Exeter. I

hear it was a hunting party for the gentlemen. What were your plans for the week?" Her question worked perfectly and soon Lady Lamptonshire was happily speaking at length about their planned trip to Exeter that had now been delayed thanks to their injured horse. The conversation took them the whole way to Corfe Castle, where it was exclaimed with delight when they arrived.

"Here we are. What a sight this is. Quite a ruin, isn'tit? But a beautiful one."

Sarah leaned out of the window as she nodded in agreement with Lady Lamptonshire's words. It was beautiful. It was one of her favorite places to come walking with Rebecca.

Sat upon a rounded hill above the village of Corfe, the tall grey-stone keep towered high above everything, even though it was only complete on one side, but a carcass of what it used to be. There was a myriad of other smaller walls made out of grey stone at the very top of the hill around the keep, with some even at diagonal angles from where they had been struck by canon fire during the civil war. In front of this section, the lawn banked down, sweeping before them with grandeur, before there was a wide curtain wall that separated the castle from the village with a sharp drop to the hill. To access the castle, the carriage had pulled up beside a wooden drawbridge, that led up to a gate where a portcullis was missing, with the wall falling down on one side.

"Miss Kingston?"

Sarah turned to see Lord Lakefield had already stepped down from the carriage and turned to offer her his hand. She took it as he helped her out of the carriage, feeling the way it made her skin tingle with the warmth of his touch. This was dangerous territory, something she could not allow herself to indulge in. At the soonest opportunity, she released his hand.

Chapter 11

Henry wasn't sure what to feel. On one hand, he was tempted to be angry. Catherine and Lord Hector were making such a point of dawdling round the castle, a pace they never normally took, that it was impossible not to notice how much they were trying to leave him alone in the company of Miss Kingston. They were walking at a normal pace and had somehow streaked out ahead of the others. It left Henry plenty of time to keep glancing back at Catherine and Lord Hector with angry eyes. In return, he just got happy waves back from his aunt.

Yet holding onto that anger was rather difficult with Miss Kingston at his side. The two of them had walked up the banking hill of grass within the outer curtain wall, and they were now heading toward the very top of the hill, where the keep and the other falling walls sat.

"I hope my aunt did not pressure you too much into coming today," Henry said softly, feeling that it was time to stop being so formal with Miss Kingston. There was a time when they had discussed marriage, when he had been days away from actually proposing to her. He couldn't pretend that hadn't happened.

"I did feel a little backed into a corner." She confessed with a sigh. "Yet she did not pressure me, have no fear, my Lord."

"It feels a little odd to hear you call me that," he said as he fixed his gaze on the walls ahead.

"What? My Lord?" she said.

"Yes," he agreed with a nod. "I was not Lord Lakefield when we last knew each other, was I?"

"No, but we had also got accustomed to using each other's first names, I seem to remember," she said. The mention of it pulled his gaze back to her, to find she was smiling a little, though turning her head away from him, apparently trying to hide that smile.

"That was a while ago, I suppose."

"So it was," she said softly. "Your aunt is not the fast-paced walker I remember." She cleared her throat and changed the conversation,

looking back behind her.

“Last week she romped round a park so fast that I couldn’t find her for half of the walk.”

“Perhaps something is amiss today?”

“Or she is meddling.” Henry pointed out and turned his gaze fully to Miss Kingston.

“Ah, I see,” she said, her eyes widening. An awkward silence descended between them, as they just looked at one another for a minute, before Miss Kingston walked on again, toward the center of the keep. Henry hurried on behind her. He knew he could have let her be, trailed behind to walk alongside Lord Hector and his aunt, but he didn’t want to. Instead, he followed Miss Kingston into the keep and out onto a little balcony section.

“Woah…” he skidded to a halt at the very edge. “That is a rather steep drop.” It fell away into a sheer drop, before it met the banking grass a few feet down.

“Yes, take care. Some people have had accidents here,” she said softly moving to where a low-lying wall bordered the edge of the balcony. She leaned on the wall, as though trying to crane her neck around the keep and see where Catherine and Lord Hector had got to. Henry didn’t copy her position, for he was too busy watching her. With his eyes upon the way her hair was bristled in the wind, down to the curve of her neck, it was too easy to feel lost in that tingle of excitement that came with being attracted to her. It seemed after two years that attraction had not faded. It had only grown.

Then his eyes slipped further down to the wall that began to move.

“Miss Kingston?” he said with worry, watching as one of the stones she was leaning on began to slide out of place. “Sarah!” Her name fell suddenly from him as he reached out toward her.

She was leaning on the wall so at ease that as it began to fell away, she did too, tipping backwards. Henry reached out for her with panic, having to scuff his shoes along the stone ground as he grabbed her wrist. She flailed, falling away, before he got hold of her and wrenched her forward. She had been teetering on the very edge, in danger of going completely until he snatched her back and she fell

forward, into his chest. He kept one hand on her wrist as the other came up around her waist, keeping her there. She was breathing heavily, her face pale with panic, and her lips parted as she looked up at him.

“Th…thank you,” she stammered as she looked away from him, down at the rocks that had just fallen far to the earth beneath them. “I could have gone then.”

“You very nearly did,” he said, frightened just how close she had come to it.

He backed up with her, pulling her far away from the balcony and into the enclosed section of the keep wall.

“Are you all right?” he asked, unable to take his arms off her yet. She didn’t move to pull away either. Her hands were resting on his chest, with one of her hands looping around a lapel on his jacket.

“Yes,” she said, nodding slightly. “It’s just…”

With them standing so near to one another, secluded from the others by the sheer height and depth of the walls, he had no wish to step away. He could feel her breath around his cheeks, reminding him of the one stolen kiss he had taken in their courtship two years ago. He was inches away from taking another kiss. His heart was thumping hard in his chest, ordering him to do it.

“It’s just we should not be standing so close, my Lord,” she whispered to him.

“You do not seem in a hurry to get away.” His words made her eyes close a little, as though blocking out the words, though still, she made no move to get out of his arms. With his one arm around her waist, he pulled her an inch closer toward him, until she was nestled against him. The move made her eyes shoot open.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” she said again, even quieter than before.

“I do not seem to be able to stop it.” It was a confession, one he hadn’t expected to make, but now it was out there in the open, he didn’t think he could keep other words back. He glanced around them, but seeing they were still hidden by the walls, he took it further. “I have never forgotten you. You know that?”

She held his gaze, not looking away, though her breath appeared to hasten.

“I haven’t forgotten you either. I never could have done.” Her words made his pulse quicken even more.

“There’s more.”

“More?” she repeated.

“So much more.” He tilted his head more toward her, testing the waters, but she didn’t move away. She just tilted her head a little more up to him, as that blush that he had seen earlier in the carriage crept across her cheeks. “I still care for you, Sarah.” He allowed himself to use her first name.

She didn’t say anything, not at first. She broke their gaze though and looked down, somewhere in the center of his chest instead. The quiet made him feel like his heart was cracking in two. It had cracked once when she had run away from him two years ago, it was breaking again now that she wouldn’t say anything to him.

Her hand around his lapel unfurled and she slid his palm to the center of his chest. It was an intimate touch, one that made him envelop her even tighter in his arm.

“If you feel nothing for me, how can you touch me like that?” he asked in a whisper.

“I never said I felt nothing for you,” she said, her voice strained. Those words gave him hope, it was all he needed to hear.

“Sarah. How do you feel about me?”

“Pray, do not ask me not.”

“Why not?”

“Because it can never be.”

“I’m going to deal with that issue in a minute,” he said hurriedly. “I need to solve one problem at a time here. Am I alone in still caring for you? You just said you have never forgotten me. Please, Sarah, tell

me. Do you still…?" He broke off. He was about to ask if she loved him, but he couldn't say the words.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes back to his. There were unshed tears in those eyes. She blinked a few times, keeping them at bay.

"I am more attached to you then you can imagine," she said in a whisper.

He could hear footsteps. Catherine and Lord Hector were clearly getting nearer. He couldn't let them catch up to him yet, not now Sarah had just admitted those words. He released her a little, though he adjusted his hold to her hand and used it to draw her away from their hiding place, in hunt of a new one.

They had to jump down from the stone floor they were on, onto another stone floor that was a few feet below, with the steps that had once been there connecting the two platforms long destroyed. From there, he drew her past more walls until they were on the far side of the ruins. With more walls between them and the others in their party, he pulled Sarah into a crevice between two stacks of stones.

"My Lord, we should go back," she whispered.

"Do not call me that. Please, call me Henry," he pleaded with her as he took her in his arms another time. Despite her words, she didn't walk out of his hold, though she had ample opportunity to do so.

"Henry, if we are seen like this –"

"That doesn't mean you want me to stop." He realized as a smile came into his face. He pulled on her waist, just a little, until she was an inch from him, then took his liberty and leaned down toward her, giving her the chance to pull away, but she didn't. He pressed his lips to hers, stealing what he had stolen just once before, a kiss.

It was intense despite its simplicity of a press of lips, with Sarah's hands curling around his lapels, pulling him further down toward her. His own hands rested on the crook of her waist, holding her to him. The thrill that she was kissing him back made his body tingle with excitement, pulling her even more to him.

When they parted from one another, it was because they could hear Lord Hector's voice getting nearer. They held onto one another still,

though they stayed exactly where they were, hidden between the stacks of stones. Henry held her gaze and clung onto her, as they listened to Lord Hector's voice disappear once again. Their hiding place had worked. Lord Hector and Catherine had to have taken a different path. Once certain they were alone, Henry moved down, ready to kiss Sarah another time, but she altered the hold on him. With a firm hand in the center of his chest, she stopped him from moving forward another time.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"We cannot do this," she said simply, looking panicked.

"Yes, we can," he said with a smile. "And we just have done."

"You cannot kiss me like that," she said in a harried whisper.

"You were very much kissing me back."

"I know." She lifted her hands off his chest and covered her face with it, hiding from him. "I should not have done that."

"Was the kiss really so bad?" he asked, feeling a lurch of fear in his stomach.

"What? No!" She lowered her hands. "How could you think that?"

"Your current reaction is not filling me with confidence."

"No, the kiss was…" She closed her eyes and bit her lip, seeking a word for it.

"No words?" he asked, leaning down toward her, unable to stay away when she looked so beautiful. Her eyes flew open.

"No words," she confirmed. "There was nothing wrong with the kiss, but we must stop this. It cannot happen again."

"Why ever not?" he asked, feeling numb as she walked out of his arms. "Sarah, you ran away from me once two years ago. If you are about to run away another time, when you have confessed that you are still attached to me, I need to know why."

"Have you forgotten what happened?" she asked, her eyes flashing

with anger. It woke him up from his daze. He turned in a small circle and brushed a hand through his hair in stress.

“Believe me, I have not forgotten a single thing from that night.”

“Then you will remember that I am a ruined woman. I carry a stain on my reputation as though it is an infection, harming everything it touches. You cannot come near me, Henry.”

His eyes widened in realization.

“Wait…are you telling me that you went into hiding two years to protect *me?”* He was angry at the idea. Yes, it was noble, kind too, but she ran away for him? When he had no choice in the matter?

“What else was I supposed to do?” she asked quietly. “It was to protect you and my family. This is why it doesn’t matter what I feel for you, or what you feel for me. It would ruin you to be associated with me in the slightest.” She took a step away, clearly intent on running once again.

He felt that anger lurch in his stomach, so strongly that what was a simmering resentment turned into a boiling rage.

“Sarah? Sarah!” He ran after her, blocking her off as she tried to walk between two walls that were fixed at diagonal angles. “Listen to me, please.” She backed up a little, as though afraid if he touched her another time. The mere sight made that anger worse. “What if I told you I was prepared to take that risk on my reputation?”

“Then that shows me you have no idea what it is like to have a ruined reputation,” she said quietly. “It destroys everything. My father had to abandon his career as an MP. We all went into hiding to come away from the gossip and the cruelty. It is because I am still attached to you that I can never do that to you, Henry.”

The fact she managed to say his Christian name despite her other words jolted him. He stood straight and placed hishands on his hips.

“I could never do that to you,” she said, taking another step away from him. “Never.”

“And I have no say in the matter at all? You have made the decision and that is it?” he asked in disbelief.

“That is the way it has to be.” She spun on her heel and walked away. He nearly went after her, nearly, but in the end, he just leaned against one of the ruins’ walls nearby and tipped his head back, as the anger continued to burn in his stomach.

Henry hadn’t calmed down by the time they were taking the carriage ride back to Swanage. It meant that he tuned out the conversation entirely in the carriage, ignoring the way his aunt whittered on about paintings, whilst Lord Hector talked about how impressed he was with Corfe Castle. All that Henry could do was stare at Sarah.

Sarah. Before others, he would use her surname, but after that kiss, there was no way he could think of her as Miss Kingston again.

When the carriage arrived outside her cottage, he stepped down to help her out, offering his hand. When it came to her retrieving her hand, he held onto it for a beat longer, wanting to maintain the contact, but she wrenched it free regardless. As she hurried up the pathway toward the cottage, he let out a shuddery breath, still struggling to keep a lid on his anger, as he looked back into the coach at his aunt and Lord Hector. They were so absorbed in conversation that they didn’t seem to be aware of him. It gave him an opportunity. He turned and followed Sarah down the pathway, until she reached the door.

“What are you doing?” she asked, not quite opening the front door yet. “Go back,” she said, gesturing to the carriage.

“I have no say in the matter? Really? None at all?” He couldn’t get over it. She looked sad. The sheer extent of it as her lip began to tremble nearly dislodged his anger, but not quite. “You are making a decision about my life here.”

“It is to protect you, Henry,” she whispered.

“I don’t want protecting!”

“It is because I care for you that I must protect you regardless of what you say.” She matched his tone in its seething and quiet nature. “I think it best that for the remainder of your time in town, you do not seek me out. We should avoid each other.” She avoided his gaze as she

said the words too.

“Sarah, please –”

“Promise me, please? Promise me you will not seek me out?” She looked back up to him, breathing heavily, pleading with him. She backed away from him, out of his reach, until her back was against the door. The sight of it made that fury snap within him.

“As you wish,” he said harshly, turned and walked away.

Chapter 12

It had been two days and for a lot of that time Sarah had been working on a new sketch. It was of Corfe Castle, with the great towering keep dominating the skyline, with the sun rising almost as high as the top of the keep. She worked quickly, and fast, her hand barely hesitating at all as she shaded in different parts, creating the perfect preparatory sketch.

At the end of the second day, she sat down to begin the painting, propping up the easel in the candlelight with a blank canvas. Across the room, Anne was dozing in a chair after their supper, with her book resting on her chest, barely paying attention to what Sarah was doing. Sarah was secretly pleased for it. She didn't want anymore questions about why she was painting this particular scene before her.

It took some time for the painting to come together. She didn't care that it took hours, with her burning down the candlelight whilst her mother's soft snores filled the room. She just wanted to get as much done of the painting that night. With the curtains drawn, darkness beyond, and only one other person in the room, she felt a kind of liberty that came with isolation, indulging in her private thoughts.

As the castle began to grow on the canvas, with the grey stone contrasting the lush green grass, she turned her attention to the activity in the picture. It had taken a while for her to realize that the landscape was far too still a piece, that something else needed to be happening in it.

From the view of the keep she had drawn, there was a perfect sight of the balcony. There, she began to paint small stones falling, collapsing down off the balcony before they dropped to the earth far below. On top of the balcony, she drew two tiny figures. One was wearing a cream dress that was buffeted in the wind, the other was wearing a deep black suit, with his hand around the woman's wrist as he pulled her back from the edge of the platform. That was their only connection in the painting, his hand on her wrist as she teetered on the very edge, keeping her back from oblivion.

The snoring stopped abruptly, and Sarah turned her head to see that Anne was awake, rearranging herself on the chair as she yawned.

"What time is it?" Anne asked gently.

“It is gone midnight.”

“Midnight? My goodness, you must have been painting a long time, and I do not usually nap so long. I think it is time we both went to bed.” As Anne stood to her feet, preparing to retire for the night, Sarah couldn’t go anywhere just yet. She sat back from the painting and analyzed it a little more, with her gaze upon the two figures.

“The painting feels alive, dear,” Anne said sweetly as she came up to stand behind her.

“Does it?” Sarah asked, gulping as she looked up to her mother.

“The activity in the picture…it just feels so…” She clearly had no words for it, but she gestured at the two figures regardless. “I like it very much indeed. It makes me feel as though I am standing on the very edge of this precipice myself, in danger of falling.”

Sarah could remember the feeling all too vividly, the fear then the safety. It had all happened so quickly.

“Who are the figures?” Anne asked. Fortunately, the figures were so tiny that Sarah had no need to paint in faces, making them impossible to identify. “Just a creation of my mind. I came up with the idea at the castle.”

“When did you last go?” Anne’s words made Sarah pause with her palette and turn to face her mother.

“Do you not remember? Mother, I only went two days ago.”

“Oh, yes, of course you did.” Anne spoke hurriedly with a smile, though the smile seemed to be covering up a look of being lost. Sarah sighed, knowing the truth. Her mother could not remember the day clearly at all.

“Perhaps it is time for bed, mother.”

“Yes, I am sure you are right.” Anne wished her goodnight another time then slowly wandered out of the room. Sarah stared after her, slowly sitting back down into a painting stool as the fear washed over her again. She might as well have been standing on that precipice as she stared after her mother.

“She is getting more forgetful,” Sarah muttered to herself. She would have to make a point of arranging another visit with a doctor, but she feared it might do little good. Anne’s own mother had been similarly forgetful. It had just been a case of being patient with her, softly reminding her of things from the past. Some days were better than others. Sarah knew it wouldn’t be long before Anne asked her again why they were hiding in a cottage in Swanage. After what had happened between her and Henry that day, she knew she would struggle to give a convincing explanation.

“Eek! He’s there.” Sarah practically squealed the words. She and Rebecca had just been for a rather long walk across the beach and around the cove with their sketchbooks, though Rebecca’s book had spent more time closed than open. Sarah clutched the sketchbook to her chest, hoping she could use it to hide her body as she spied Henry walking along the promenade, alone.

“You’re jumping like he’s an adder. He won’t bite, Sarah,” Rebecca said, walking along behind her.

Sarah blushed at the memory of what had happened between her and Henry at Corfe. She hadn’t told Rebecca about that kiss, all she had said was that it had to be the last time she saw Henry whilst he was staying. The memory of that kiss made her lift a hand to her lips all the same, and trace the edges, remembering the feeling and the intensity of his kiss.

“You look afraid that he really will biteyou.”

“Rebecca!” she said in reprimand, pulling another smile from her friend. “He cannot see me, it just won’t do.” She looked up the promenade to the steps that led from the town to the cottage. They were fully in Henry’s view. Even if she made a run for it now, she was certain to be seen by him.

“If you run for it, he’ll see you.”

“I noticed that!”

“Looks like you’ll have to think of something else.”

Sarah considered running all the way back across the beach and circling back through town to take the other road up to the house, but it would be a long walk, and she would run the risk of running into Henry elsewhere in town.

“You will have to go distract him,” she said, taking Rebecca’s arm and pushing her toward the promenade.

“Me? Do not be silly,” Rebecca said with a wave of her hand. “What am I supposed to say? Lord Lakefield, do you mind looking this way? My friend wishes to run home without you being able to see her.”

“I’m sure you can think of something smarter than that,” Sarah said, pushing Rebecca up a set of steps toward the promenade.

“You overestimate my abilities,” Rebecca said with panic as she reached the top of the steps. “Sarah, is this really necessary? Can you not just walk past him say good day and be on your way?”

“No, I really cannot,” Sarah said with feeling, watching as Rebecca put one hand on her hip and gestured at her with the sketchbook in her grasp.

“Something else happened at Corfe Castle, didn’t it? Something you are not telling me about.”

“Nothing happened.” She cast a glance toward Henry just as he turned their way. She fell still, fearing he had seen her, but from this distance, he didn’t appear to have noticed her amongst the others on the beach. He looked out across the sea for a minute and then turned back to face forward. Sarah sighed with relief at not being seen.

“Good lord, oh yes, nothing happened,” Rebecca said, mocking the words Sarah had used. “You are skittish indeed for saying nothing happened.”

“Are you my friend or not?”

“You know I love you like a sister.”

“Then go help me out and please distract Lord Lakefield.”

“Oh, very well. I will just have to plead the same favor from you someday,” Rebecca sighed and took a step away on the promenade.

“Though if I am ever lucky enough to fall in love, I am not sure I will be running away from the love of my life.”

Rebecca hurried off before Sarah could admonish her for her words.

With care, she walked along the beach, coming up until she was almost level with Henry and waiting for Rebecca to make the distraction.

“Lord Lakefield! What a surprise, how are you?” Rebecca’s words were perfectly timed. Henry turned around to greet Rebecca. Sarah didn’t wait to hear any more of their conversation. She hurried up onto the promenade as quickly as she could, then she took the steps that led all the way up to the path outside her cottage. Once she was at the top, she had to pause and catch her breath from running up hill.

From the vantage point the higher path offered her, she could look down perfectly to see a bird’s eye view of Henry and Rebecca talking together. Though she couldn’t see Henry’s face clearly, she could see a little of Rebecca’s. She was smiling andlaughing in Henry’s company. It was with some alarm that Sarah felt her stomach tighten at the sight.

“I am not jealous,” she muttered to herself. Though the fact her feet lingered for a little longer where she was, rather than walking off and heading straight home didn’t help with her statement. Instead, she watched them for a little longer. By the time Rebecca had smiled for the third time, her envy had grown so much that Sarah couldn’t watch anymore.

She turned and hurried off down the path, heading straight into the cottage. Once she was inside, she went straight to the painting she had been working on the night before and set up the easel once again, feeling strangely determined to add more to the picture. As she sat down, she was already dipping the paintbrushes into her premixed paints, gathering them ready. She added more stones to those that were dropping from the precipice, and more details to the two figures.

Despite their tiny size in the picture, it was now possible to make out the woman’s hair, the same color as her own, and it was possible to make out the man’s hair too, the brown hair that was practically the color of chocolate.

“I know you and I do not know each other very well, my Lord, but if it is not too impertinent to say, you do not seem particularly happy?” Miss Hampshire’s perceptive statement made Henry shift uncomfortably. It had been a surprise to meet her on the promenade, especially since Sarah was nowhere to be seen, but now Miss Hampshire was wrongfooting him even more.

“You are very astute,” he said softly. “I have come for a walk to cheer my spirits, but I fear it is not doing me much good.”

“May I walk back across the promenade with you? I have a proposition for you that might give you a reason to smile,” she said, gesturing back to the other way.

“Yes, of course,” he said, nodding his head and falling into step with her. She was pleasant company indeed to be around, and in their tea had already proven herself to be a clever and light conversationalist. He rather hoped that her conversation would distract him from his thoughts that were upsetting him so much. Disappointingly, her first words only brought back the pain.

“My friend Miss Kingston seems to be walking in just as somber state as you are these days,” she said softly as they walked together.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he said with meaning. He had been angry when she had rejected him, refusing to let the bond between them become anything deeper because of her want to protect him. Since then, that anger had abated to sadness. “I wish for nothing more than Miss Kingston to be happy in this world.”

“I thought you might,” Miss Hampshire said, looking up at him with a smile.

“Ah, I take it Miss Kingston has informed you of our past then?”

“That she has, though she is cagey with some details,” she said, looking down the promenade ahead of them. “Since Miss Kingston came here, we have been instant friends, sisters that do not share blood. In that time, I have seen her go through many emotional states, and I have never seen her as changeable as I have over the last few days. Excitable, happy when she is in your company, and then… shockingly sad.”

Hearing that he was the cause of that sadness made him grimace.

“Your words are not cheering me as perhaps you hoped they might,” he said with a low voice.

“That is because I have not attempted to cheer you up yet,” Miss Hampshire said, putting a skip in her step as she turned her face back to him.

“You must have a plan,” he said, pointing at her face. “You have the same expression my Sunt has when she’s up to something.”

“I am seeking a distraction for my friend and have managed to secure one I know will work. There is to be a summer dance assembly here in town. Nothing special, you understand, hardly on the scales of what you must be used to in the ton and in London. There are the Old Town Assembly Rooms on the far side of Swanage. All are to be invited, working men and women included, as well as the refined. It happens every year and is usually a joyous occasion. It is to be this weekend and my friend has agreed to come. It is my suggestion to you that the occasion might cheer you up too.”

“A dance?” he said with some uncertainty.

“For one thing, it is a chance to distract yourself with good humor, and good wine, few things are better in this world, I am sure.” Her wit brought a smile from him. “You would also have the chance to see my friend again, so that I am sure is the more persuasive matter.”

“Miss Hampshire, your friend asked me not to seek her out another time,” he said, coming to a halt. Miss Hampshire stopped a few paces in front.

“That is the genius of this. You would not be seeking her out, so much as attending a public event. Wouldn’t you?”

He smiled as he realized how right she was.

“What do you say?” She prompted him on further.

“Very well,” he said with a smile. “I shall extend the invitation to my Aunt and Lord Hector too.”

Chapter 13

“Oh my, it’s lively, isn’t it?” Catherine giggled. She laid a hand to her chest as they stepped into the Old Town Assembly Rooms. They had stepped into the first room that was set up for dancing, with a musician’s gallery at the far side and fiddlers already in place. Through a door to their far right, Henry could see a card room had been set up for games, to their left, through an archway there was a supper room with food spread across the tables.

“I have never seen anything quite liked it,” Henry said with a small smile as a working man took hold of a woman’s hand nearby and led her to the floor. There was no standing on ceremony in such a place, no dance cards, no servers coming round with drinks. There was something freeing about the place that made the smile on Henry’s face more natural than it had been before. “I rather like it.”

“I thinkwe will be very amused indeed,” Catherine said as a rather portly gentleman walked toward her. There had been no introduction, no prevarication of any kind, but he offered his hand to her, nevertheless. “But, Sir, we have not been introduced.”

“Oh, we do not bother with such things here, good Lady. Tonight, we call Swanage’s free night. We can introduce ourselves to each other whilst dancing, what do you say?” The portly gentleman certainly had a suaveness to his tone that made Catherine blush. Henry and Lord Hector exchanged amused glances as she placed her hand in his.

“I would be delighted, Sir,” she said, taking his hand before looking back at Henry and Lord Hector. “I hope you two will find something to busy yourselves with whilst I am gone.”

“I am sure we will,” Lord Hector said, waving her off. Henry laughed as his aunt was towed toward the rest of the dancers and joined the group. It was busy and warm, with the clamoring heat of the day having wormed its way inside the building, making him sticky and rather uncomfortable under his jacket.

“It is far too hot!” Henry complained, pulling at his collar.

“Well, when in Rome, as they say,” Lord Hector said and began to remove his jacket.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re not in London now, are we? Look around. Do you see any other gentlemen wearing tailcoats in this heat?” Lord Hector had a point. With one glance about, Henry could see no man was wearing a coat. Most were slung across some of the chairs in the supper room next door. Shrugging, Henry took his jacket off too, and gazed around himself.

There wasn’t a sad face in the place. All were happy, as gentlemen danced with ladies, crossing classes, no one seemed to mind. It was liberating after the constraints of attending events in the ton for so long. It made Henry step toward the dancefloor, itching to be a part of the fun.

“I’m gasping for a drink,” Lord Hector said, moving to his side and adjusting his collar too.

“Through there, good man.” Another gentleman court Lord Hector’s words. From his attire, Henry presumed he could have been a lawyer or a clerk. He pointed into the supper room. “There’s sherry, punch, wine, and beer too,” he said as he walked past them, pulling a young lady onto the dancefloor.

“Beer?” Lord Hector said excitedly.

“Oh yes!”

“I have never seen you so excited,” Henry laughed as he hurried after Lord Hector into the supper room. It was very different to the supper rooms in London. Here, the tables were decorated with flowers and summer leaves taken from the gardens nearby. Amongst the decorations, serving platters were piled high with food. As Henry looked between everything, marveling at it and wondering why London did not bother with such things, he found Lord Hector pushed a glass of beer under his nose.

“To Swanage, I rather like how much this place bends the rules,” Lord Hector said and chinked their glasses together. Henry started gulping from the glass, glad to quench his thirst in the heat as the words registered with him.

“Bend the rules…” he muttered to himself between sips.

“What was that?” Lord Hector asked.

“Nothing,” he said, turning to look between the rooms, looking for someone in particular. As Lord Hector nattered at his side and the two of them drank their beer, the person Henry was looking for eventually appeared, making him pause.

Sarah walked into the supper room beside her friend, Miss Hampshire. Dressed in a Pomona green gown that hugged her figure in a way that made Henry practically groan under his breath, she turned more than one head. It matched her eyes perfectly, not that he could see her eyes across the distance of the room, but he knew her eye color well enough to know it did.

She was happy, smiling and giggling away with her friend. Happy, as she should be.

“Excuse me, my friend,” Henry said, placing his beer glass down on the table.

“Bored with me already?” Lord Hector teased. “Or is it someone else’s company you crave?”

Henry didn’t even answer, he just shot his friend a warning look and hurried off across the supper room, heading straight toward Sarah. She didn’t notice him approaching. In fact, she didn’t see him until he was right beside her, making her turn and her eyes widen in surprise.

“Lord Lakefield!” she used his proper title and hurried to curtsy. “You came to our little assembly?”

“Yes, of course. When Miss Hampshire mentioned it, I didn’t want to miss the opportunity,” he said easily. Sarah immediately turned to her friend with an angry stare, but Miss Hampshire looked away.

“Oh, look at that, it’s the Misses Tilneys, I must go and say good evening,” Miss Hampshire said, pointing away.

“You usually avoid them, Rebecca,” Sarah said.

“This evening, I find I am craving their company.” Miss Hampshire’s words were said with a smirk before she hurried off, leaving the two of them relatively alone.

“You look beautiful.” The words fell from Henry’s lips without him thinking too much about it. They seemed to have the desired effect as she blushed and looked down.

“Thank you. I suppose this evening must be something of an eye opener for you. It is not like London.”

“Far from it!” he said, laughing and looking around as some of the dancers collided with one another in the room next door. In the ton, there might well have been an argument at such a thing, but here the two couples laughed it off and carried on. “I like it, more than I can say.”

“You do?” Sarah asked, looking up at him in surprise.

“Lord Hector has just pointed out to me how it is a place that bends rules. I rather like that.” He looked back to her and offered her his hand. She stared down at it. “You look as though I am trying to give you a toad or something, not my hand to dance.”

“Do you not remember our conversation at Corfe, my Lord?” she said, arching her eyebrows.

“Vividly.” He groaned with the word, pulling the tiniest of smiles from her. “Yet you said my reputation was at stake. Looking around here, reputations do not matter, and rules can be bent. So…Miss Kingston,” he paused and offered her his hand again. “Would you dance the next with me?”

She hesitated for a moment, chewing on her lip.

“I suppose no one here would care, would they?” she said, glancing around.

“Not in the slightest.”

She smiled and gave him her hand.

As Henry led Sarah onto the floor, she felt the heat growing worse in the room. Partly because they were amongst the other dancers, but mostly because she was aware of the feeling of his hand in hers.

“What dance is this?” Henry asked her as they took up their place.

“Think of it as the liveliest quadrille you will ever dance,” she said with glee, remembering the first time she had danced at an event like it. They had taken all the traditional dances and put an informal spin on them, adopting them to more jigs and lively tunes, rather than gentle or elegant turns around the floor.

“You might have to tell me when I go wrong,” he said as he drew her forward, taking her hand in one of his and placing his other hand to her waist.

“You were always a good dancer.” She tilted her head up to him, showing her admiring smile.

“I seem to remember that was something you rather liked about me.”

They began to dance together, copying the couples either side of them as they galloped one way and then the other.

“Were there other things you liked? Or was it just the dancing?” he asked with a teasing smile.

“You are fishing for compliments,” she said, trying to stop her smile and faltering.

“You are dodging them.” He brought their gallop to a stop and released her waist, turning her with his grasp on her hand under his arm. She spotted with her head, focusing on him with her eyes and whipping her head back round to look at him each time he turned.

“There were a lot of things I liked about you. Conversation, dancing, your lack of ability to play draughts.”

“Oh, uncalled for.” He pretended to be hurt and placed his free hand to his chest.

“What? I won every time.”

“And I won cribbage every time.”

“That you did. Horse riding at least we were more on level pegging,” she said as he brought her spins to a stop and took her in his arms again. Together they travelled under another couple’s arms that were

held up in an arch.

“Ah, you are referring to our races?”

“Of course.”

“Sarah, I let you win half of them.”

“What?” she said sharply, flicking her head round as they created an arch with their arms for the next couple to move under. It took her a moment to realize he had used her first name again, for she was so startled by his words. “You didn’t…”

“I did,” he said with a teasing smile. “You were so upset that I won our first race that there after I decided I would lose a fair few of them.”

“Cruel man!”

“Cruel? I let you win,” he said with a smile as he lowered their hands back down, taking both firmly in his. They stepped toward each other and back again, repeatedly in a small bobbing movement, drawing near to one another and far.

“But you have just now taken the victories away from me,” she said teasingly. “You have rewritten the past.”

“Surely in a good way,” he said with a laugh. “I cared for you so much that I wanted to see you smile. Can you blame me for that?”

“Not in the slightest.” She felt a warm buzz at his words as they circled one another before beginning the routine again, starting with the galloping back and forth.

For a minute, they fell quiet, not speaking and flirting, just dancing and holding onto one another in a merry silence. As they came to circle on another again at the end of the routine, Sarah felt the strength of his gaze upon her as though it burned her skin, but it was a pleasant burn, that made her stomach leap with excitement.

As they came to a close in the dance, he brought her slightly nearer to her than propriety would have dictated at the ton, not that anyone noticed here, for who could care or even realize. He brought her so near that he could whisper in her ear, to be heard above the noise of

the violinists, the pipers and the other dancers around them.

“It could be always like this, Sarah.” His words brought her up short. Her hand in his tightened, as did her other hand around his bicep. She was very aware that he wasn’t wearing a jacket. With just his shirt she could feel the tension of his muscle beneath.

She said nothing as the music finished and they parted from each other. He bowed, holding her gaze as she clumsily curtsied, terrified of what he had said.

“It can’t be like this,” she whispered the words to herself, so low that Henry couldn’t hear her, though he frowned, clearly knowing that she had said something. He escorted her from the floor, yet her legs were uncertain beneath her, making her cling to her hand a little tighter.

She was trying to think of something to say, anything that would stop the hope that Henry had just clung onto. Dancing together here was fine, away from the ton, but he would have to go home at some point. It was an indulgence for a night, but it could not last longer than that.

Before she could say anything, their path off the floor was blocked off. Lady Lamptonshire was there, talking with Anne and the Miss Tilney sisters.

“Ah, perfect timing,” Lady Lamptonshire said as she gestured to Henry. “Miss Emma Tilney, Miss Roberta Tilney, allow me to introduce my nephew, Lord Lakefield.” As he bowed and the sisters curtsied, Sarah was aware that he didn’t let go of her hand. It made Anne’s gaze linger on the connection between them.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, my Lord,” Miss Emma Tilney said before turning her gaze to Sarah. “Is this your suitor, Miss Kingston?”

The words made Sarah feel like the floor had disappeared from beneath her feet. Once upon a time, she could have answered yes. When she said nothing, and neither did Henry, words failed her completely. She looked at him as he looked at her, and she did the only thing she could think of doing. She escaped.

Sarah turned, released his hand and hurried across the room, heading straight for the exit.

Chapter 14

The moment Sarah's hand left his, Henry followed her, hurrying after her. She went passed all the dancers in the ballroom and out of the double door entrance, with him following close behind her.

"Sarah?" he called after her as she ran down the front steps in front of the hall building, holding the skirt of her dress in her hand. "Sarah?" Yet she didn't even pause at his shout. He practically had to jump down the steps in order to catch up with her. She walked around the building, heading toward the hills that banked up either side of Swanage Bay. "Are you intending to run across the entire bay to get away from me?"

"Not quite," she called back, as she clambered up the green hill. He followed her, catching up and managing to block off her path. Sarah stumbled back a step, with her lips parted in surprise at him cutting her off. "Let me go, Henry."

"No," he said with feeling, refusing to step to the side. "You ran away from me once at an event like this, I will not let you do it again."

"Please, just let me go," she said, appearing desperate.

"I will let you go. Good god, if you're going to run from me with this much determination all the time then soon, I will have no choice, but before you run off again, at least hear out what I have to say." He put his hands together in a begging gesture.

She wavered, not saying anything, but staring at him, as the sea breeze whistled up the bay, buffeting her hair and the green dress.

"Please?" he asked again, taking a step forward. She didn't step away and eventually nodded, giving him the chance that he needed to speak. "You enjoyed that dance as much as I did, I know you did."

She whimpered a little as though fighting tears, but in the dying light of the sun with the grey of dusk growing, he couldn't tell if there were unshed tears in her eyes.

"Forget everything for a minute. Forget what happened two years ago and why you ran. Just tell me this, if it hadn't happened. If I had asked you that night what I was going to ask you, what would you

have said?”

“What were you going to ask me?”

“Can you not guess?”

Silence descended between the two of them. All he could hear was the wind and her heavy breathing.

“Sarah, please.” He reached out, taking her hand and bringing it up to his lips, kissing the back. She closed her eyes as he kissed her hand. He chose to read it as her indulging in his touch. “If I had asked you that night to marry me, what would you have said?”

“Are you trying to torment us both?” she asked, opening her eyes again.

“I want to know what life I could have had.”

“Then I would have said yes,” she said, lifting her eyes to his. This time, he could see those tears in her eyes. When one slipped out down her cheek coupled with these words, he couldn’t hold back from her. He lifted a hand to her cheek and brushed the tear away with his thumb.

“You would have said yes?” he said, gasping with almost disbelief.

“In a heartbeat.”

He kissed her, unable to stay back from her, hardly caring if anyone happened to look out of the assembly rooms and see them, though at this distance he doubted they could be seen. She kissed him back. She must have sensed his desperation in the kiss for as he clung to her with one hand on her cheek and his other on her arm, for she wove her arms up around his neck and held him to her. When the kiss finished, it was sudden and sharp, nearly knocking him off his feet as she reared back and stumbled away.

“Oh no,” he said, taking a step forward. “You cannot kiss me like that and run from me again. You just said you would have said yes. You would have married me.”

“In another life.”

“Why cannot it be in this life!?”

“Because the Duke of Huntingdon spoiled our chances.” Her words clear as she lifted her chin, straightening her spine. She was a figure of courage before him, defiant, yet crippling his hope all at the same time. “He changed everything, Henry. It’s not something we can go back from.”

“Even though I love you?” He hadn’t even considered holding back the words. It was his last-ditch attempt to keep her in his life.

“Oh.” She gasped and covered her mouth with both hands, still looking up at him.

“Does that not change things?”

“No,” she said, slightly muffled behind her hands.

“Did you just say no?”

“I said no,” she said, lowering her hands for him to hear her clearly. “Henry, listen to me.” She moved sharply toward him, reaching out. He took her hands midair, clasping onto them. “It is because you said you love me that it is all the more reason for us to stay away from each other.”

“You realize how mad that sounds?”

“You think I could ever forgive myself for dragging your name and your family’s name through the mud?” she asked, shaking her head. “I could never do that to you. You would never recover from an association with me. Your aunt’s name would be ruined too. Your friends by association could even be tarnished.” She stepped toward him and reached up on his toes. He tried to find words to rebuff her argument, but she kissed him before he could do. This kiss was just a light one, barely there, a brush of lips that was a tantalizing tease. “This is for you, Henry.”

With those words, she backed away from him and released his hands. He didn’t follow, he just watched her walk away, clambering back down the bank of the hill and in toward the assembly. She glanced back once to him in the doorway before she disappeared inside.

He paced a few times, up and down the grassy bank before he sat

down on the earth and hung his head in his hands, not sure what to do or think after what had occurred. He wasn't sure how long he sat there, but it had to be some time, for dusk turned to night and the stars began to dapple the sky above him. He only looked away from those stars when he heard footsteps coming near him, climbing up the bank of the hill. He turned his head to see Lord Hector was walking up the hill, carrying two beers, one in each hand.

"My friend, please, no more teasing, no more jests tonight," Henry said as Lord Hector stopped walking beside him.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Lord Hector said kindly and sat down beside him. "I thought you could do with this."

"Thanks, I certainly could." Henry took the glass and gulped eagerly from it. With no other plan ahead of him, the bottom of a beer glass certainly looked like an inviting thing to stare at.

"Did I ever tell you that Dianne and I argued in the middle of our courtship?" Lord Hector asked.

"Miss Kingston and I are not courting," Henry said sharply. "She has just made it incredibly plain that such a thing is not possible."

"I can see that from your expression. I was not trying to talk about that," Lord Hector's gentle voice made Henry turn his head to look at his friend. "I am not offering advice here on Miss Kingston, far from it. Do you remember a few months back there were a few weeks where I did not speak of Dianne at all? Neither did I see her at any event."

"I remember," Henry said, nodding in thought. "For a while, you were miserable. Then…things changed."

"So, they did," Lord Hector said, smacking his lips as he drank from his own beer. "Dianne and I had argued about a certain gentleman that would not stop pursuing her. Needless to say, it was my own jealousy that caused the argument, nothing that she had done. I suppose if I have any advice to offer, my friend, it is not about the ladies, but about suffering." Hearing the word said aloud made Henry look down at the glass in his hand, keeping his body perfectly still. "I had to pick myself up off the floor and discover there was another reason for living entirely."

"This seems rather odd considering you are now betrothed to Lady

Dianne," Henry said wryly.

"Now I am, but it was not as simple as that," Lord Hector said, grimacing with the words. "Before Dianne and I worked through our argument, I got through all the pain and found there are many other reasons to be happy. Friends, work, business, family, all of it."

"The point being?" Henry asked, nudging his friend along to the crux of their conversation.

"It feels like it's the be all and end all now, but it's not. I promise you that," Lord Hector said and clapped his shoulder in comfort. "Now, drink up your beer. Then I'll go get you another one."

Henry smiled at his friend, realizing the truth of the words. Maybe he was doomed to suffer heartbreak in one area of his life, but he had a good friend sat beside him to get through it.

Sarah lowered herself into a chair at the side of the supper room with a shaky glass of wine in her hands. She kept lifting it to her lips periodically, taking small sips to try and calm her nerves.

"Do you need a top-up or a handkerchief?" a familiar voice asked.

Sarah looked up with a small smile to see Rebecca approaching her.

"Can I say both?"

"By all means." Rebecca took the glass out of her hands, walked away to get a top-up, then returned to pass her the glass and a handkerchief. Between sips, Sarah mopped her cheeks until the tears were dried. "Well, you looked happy whilst you were dancing."

"I was," Sarah said with a sigh. "Miss Emma Tilney asked if we were courting, and it just…" She shrugged, unable to put it into words.

"It hurt," Rebecca filled in for her, as Sarah nodded. "In which case, I think we should probably get you home soon."

"Why? I was hoping to distract myself in here for a while."

"Well, for one thing you're not distracting yourself. You're wallowing

with wine and me, hiding in a corner." Rebecca pointed out, earning a wince from Sarah. "For a second thing, I think Lady Lamptonshire is looking for you."

"She is? Why?"

"Well, she said something about asking you if she could announce a courtship between you and Lord Lakefield again."

"Oh god!" Sarah said, jolting so far off the chair that she nearly dropped her wine.

"Don't lose that," Rebecca said with a smile. "It's good wine that."

"I noticed," Sarah said, taking a bigger sip than normal. "You're right, I cannot be here for her to ask me that. Get me home."

"My pleasure." Rebecca took her hand as Sarah swallowed the last of the wine. Together, they hurried out of the supper room, toward the double door exit. Rebecca waved at Anne, getting her attention. "Oh, she's there!"

"My mother or Lady Lamptonshire?" Sarah asked, shortly before she felt herself being pushed sideways by Rebecca, behind a white pillar at the side of the room. Sarah cowered behind it, realizing just what Rebecca had done. Lady Lamptonshire had appeared and was making a beeline for Rebecca.

"There you are, my dear," she said sweetly as she reached Rebecca's side. "Have you seen Miss Kingston? I have to talk to her before the evening is over!"

"I am afraid not, my Lady," Rebecca said simply. "I believe she intended on an early night though."

"Oh, what a shame that is. Who could go home early from an event such as this?" Lady Lamptonshire giggled as she gestured around the room. "Tell me, Miss Hampshire, for no doubt you have Miss Kingston's ear and know all the gossip."

"Only a little."

Sarah grimaced and pressed her body more behind the pillar, firmly hiding and wishing she could block out Lady Lamptonshire's words as

well.

“Do you know if we can finally announce another courtship between Miss Kingston and my nephew?” It was impossible to miss the hope in the lady’s voice.

“I am afraid I believe such a thing will not happen, my Lady.” Rebecca’s voice was clear, but what followed it was utter silence. It was not the reaction Sarah had expected and she rearranged her body to peer around the pillar a little more.

Lady Lamptonshire’s face was contorted into an expression she hadn’t seen before. For a woman that was always animated, only offering stern glares to her nephew every now and then with a formidable nature, this expression of utter sadness was new, with her lips pursed together and eyes that would not settle. Those eyes danced about the ballroom, apparently struggling to settle.

“I am so sorry, my Lady,” Rebecca said with evident worry. “This news has truly pained you.”

“I am afraid it has,” she said, looking back to Rebecca and attempting to smile through her sadness, but she failed for the smile lasted not even a whole second. “Well, I…I will return to my dance partner. If you would excuse me.”

“Good night, my Lady,” Rebecca said and waved her off.

With Lady Lamptonshire’s back turned, Sarah crept out from behind the pillar where Rebecca took her hand and led her off to the doorway where Anne was waiting for them.

“I have never seen the lady so sad,” Sarah said quietly, wishing she could remove the memory of that sadness. It ached and added another painful memory to the many she had already formed over this last week or so.

“She looked personally wounded by it.” Rebecca agreed with her as she towed her out of the door with Anne following behind. “I think Lady Lamptonshire might have pinned quite a lot of hope on you when they met you again.”

“She was the wife of a Marchioness,” Sarah said, feeling her sense return to her. “She must know more than anyone that a damaged

reputation does not get you very far when it comes to falling in love with someone."

"Yes, I suppose you are right."

Chapter 15

“Here, dear, help yourself to some more brioche,” Catherine said, pushing the bread and bun basket under Henry’s nose.

“Thank you,” he said, pulling out another brioche and digging in. There had been no discussion between him and his aunt of what had happened the night before, but he was thankful that Catherine had stopped making suggestions about potentially seeing Sarah again. Henry rather presumed that Lord Hector must have spoken to her and suggested that they put an end to their teasing.

“More letters,” Lord Hector said, striding into the breakfast room with some correspondence in his hand. He distributed them about the room and Henry eagerly tore into his letters, remembering what his friend had said last night about concentrating on other things in life. Business certainly seemed a pleasant distraction. With their investments going so well at the moment, it was certainly a good thing to distract himself with.

“Good news, dear?” Catherine asked with a kindly voice as she addressed Henry.

“Some.” He paused as he pulled open more letters, checking over the news form his solicitors. “Our investments are doing well, but they want more news on our joint investment with the Duke.”

“Again?” Lord Hector said, looking up from his letter. “We told them already that we were to see the Duke in Exeter with the hunting party to discuss the matter.”

“I know, clearly they are getting impatient.”

“Speaking of the Duke, guess who I have a letter from?” Lord Hector said, bending open some parchment and waving it in the air. The words made Henry go a little cold and look up from the letter in his grasp.

“Not the Duke.”

“Yes, the Duke,” Lord Hector said, bending open the letter. “Shall I tell you what he said?”

Henry didn't answer for a minute. Sometimes he wondered why he was still in business with the Duke of Huntingdon at all. Originally, there were business matters that were put in place by both of their fathers, in place long before the Duke had tried to take advantage of Sarah. By the time Sarah had disappeared and Henry's father had died, there seemed no harm in letting the investment keep running. After all, it was one of their most profitable investments. It didn't help that his blood burned every time he heard the Duke's name or had to go into a business meeting with him.

"Yes, go on," Henry said eventually, deciding it was better to get thisparticular piece of correspondence over and done with as soon as possible.

"'My dear friends,'" Lord Hector began, putting on a voice that was strangely similar to the Duke's posh accent. "'I was deeply sorry to hear of your delay to your journey and have spent the last few days having the pick of the hunting here in Exeter. I wish you would both hurry up in getting here so I can have some real competition.' Like I believe that," Lord Hector said with a laugh.

"He likes being the finest sportsman amongst us too much for that to be true." Henry agreed with him. "Good accent by the way."

"Thank you," Lord Hector said, maintaining the accent and pulling a smile from Henry. "'As the last two days have passed in what I can only describe as boredom, I have resolved to change our plans. Instead of waiting for you to come to Exeter to discuss our business and have some proper sport, I will come to you instead.'"

Catherine made a squealing sound and dropped her teacup. The sound was so alien to her that it surprised Henry as much as this news did.

"What is wrong?" Lord Hector asked, looking up as Henry and Catherine hurried to mop up the spilt tea.

"Say that again," Henry said, pausing halfway through the cleanup with handkerchiefs in his hands. "Tell me that the Duke is *not* coming to Swanage."

"He is." Lord Hector frowned and looked down at the letter again. "He says it clear as day here."

"No, no…Henry, he cannot come here!" Catherine said in a panicked

voice.

“I know, Aunt, I know,” Henry said just as hurriedly.

“Have I missed something?” Lord Hector said, looking between the two of them as he laid down the letter.

“We have to stop him from coming.”

“I think that unlikely to achieve. The letter was signed two days ago. He might well already be on his way,” Lord Hector said, gesturing down at the note.

“God’s wounds!” Henry said and struck the table with both hands as he stood to his feet. It was so sharp that even Catherine jumped.

“Henry. You should not behave so,” she warned.

“Can you blame me, Aunt?” he asked, turning round to look at her with his arms wide.

“No, I cannot,” she said, looking down at her plate with sad eyes.

“I feel like I am trying to talk a different language.” Lord Hector continued to look between the two of them. “Could someone please say what is going on?”

“This is very important, you have no idea how much, but tell me this,” Henry said, leaning on the table and staring at his friend. “When you wrote to the Duke and told him of our delay, did you…did you mention Miss Kingston’s name?”

Lord Hector swallowed, appearing distinctly uncomfortable.

“Should I not have done?”

Henry struck the table again and turned away.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Lord Hector said with a sigh. “What on earth is the problem?”

“Do you remember when I told you what happened to Miss Kingston two years ago?” Henry asked.

“Yes,” Lord Hector said, holding Henry’s gaze. “At the ball, you said a gentleman as good as attacked her.”

“I never told you his name though, did I? Ah, I should have told you his name!” Henry flung his arms down to his side as he started walking around the room again. Catherine had a trembling hand as she poured herself another cup of tea, just as unsettled, but managing to keep her temper under control, unlike Henry.

“Wait…” Lord Hector stood to his feet very slowly, pushing back the chair so that the legs scraped across the floor. “Are you telling me that the Duke of Huntingdon was the one who attacked her?”

“Yes, I am!” Henry snapped. Lord Hector seemed to wobble on his feet for a moment, as though he might just fall straight back down into his chair.

“Why are you even his friend?”

“Friend? I’m not his friend. I scoff at him every time his back is turned, but the business relationship is profitable. It started with my father and his. By the time it passed to me to control, Sa – I mean, Miss Kingston had long gone.” Henry did not miss the way Catherine’s gaze snapped at him when he nearly called Sarah by her Christian name.

“Oh…this is not good then,” Lord Hector said, reaching for the letter off the table. “You do not think he’s coming here because she’s here, do you?”

“Why else would he come?” Henry said, whipping round. “We’re in the backend of nowhere here and he is walking away from a huge hunting party. He would hardly come all this way just to talk business with us. No…she has to be the reason. Wait…” he paused and looked back to his friend. “Does he mention her?”

Lord Hector looked down at the letter in his grasp, scanning it quickly.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“That’s something, at least,” Henry said, ruffling his hair with his hands. He turned his eyes on Catherine, seeing the way she was staring at her teacup, her hand still shaking with anger flashing in her eyes. “Aunt, are you all right?”

“Do I look all right?” Catherine asked, snapping her gaze up. “We are the reason that Miss Kingston may well have to come face to face with that man again.” The dark words made Henry sink down into his chair and hang his head in his hands. He couldn’t do that to Sarah. He wasn’t able to save her once from the Duke of Huntingdon, but he was going to make damn well sure that she wouldn’t have to see him again.

“They have express messengers here, don’t they?” Henry asked, looking from his hands to Lord Hector.

“They do, with fast horses too if you pay the money for it,” Lord Hector said. “Dianne said in her last letter to me that when the express messenger I paid for arrived, he was so fast that he nearly knocked her off her feet.”

“Good, let’s hope they’re as quick as you say.” Henry jumped to his feet and headed for the exit.

“Where are you going?”

“I am going to write to the Duke and try to stop him from coming.”

“You might be too late.”

“I have to try anyway!”

By the time Henry had placed the sealed parchment into the messenger’s hands, he’d worked himself into such a state that he couldn’t sit still. So much so that Lord Hector had to take him out shooting to try and work off some of the energy. He came back at the end of the day so spent that he fell asleep in a chair in the sitting room, not aware of anything around him.

It was a few hours later that Catherine woke him up by gently shaking his shoulder.

“Henry, you’re going to have to wake up dear.” He heard the words as though they were spoken at a distance, then she shook his shoulder much more harshly. “Henry!”

“Ahh.” He jumped as he woke up, bleary-eyed and looking round at his aunt to see she had her usual stern expression on her face. “What is wrong?”

“You were snoring so loudly that you are making it impossible to concentrate on my book,” she said, pointing at the tome in her hands and waving it near the candlelight around them.

“Sorry, Aunt,” he said as he sat straight in the chair and rubbed his eyes. “Has the messenger come back yet?”

“Not yet,” Catherine said, opening her book another time and attempting to read it. Across the room, Lord Hector was absorbed in playing a game of solitaire with a pack of cards, looking more discomforted than Henry had ever seen him before.

“Is he all right?” Henry whispered to his aunt.

“It is guilt, dear. Poor Lord Hector, he had no idea he was doing anything wrong.”

The words registered and Henry took to his feet, ready to cross the room toward him.

“Oh good, you took my hint to go and apologize,” Catherine said from behind him.

“I usually get your hints,” he said over his shoulder before he crossed the room and sat down opposite Lord Hector. “Cribbage?” He offered to his friend.

“Very well,” Lord Hector said and sighed as he gathered up the cards, ready to shuffle them to begin a new game. He didn’t raise his eyes from the cards and just continued to stare down at them.

“I am sorry if I was short with you today,” Henry said sincerely, waiting until his friend looked up at him. “It is not your fault. If I had been completely honest and told you it was the Duke that went after Miss Kingston, then it wouldn’t have happened. It is very much my doing.”

“Still sounds odd to my ears,” Lord Hector said with a pained expression as he dealt out their cards. “I know it is just one of those things. An incident that I cannot undo, but that doesn’t mean I can get

rid of the guilt very easily. It's going to linger there for a while."

"There's nothing I can do to get rid of it?" Henry asked as he picked up the cards.

"Losing to me at cribbage would be a good start." Lord Hector's jest pulled a small smile from Henry.

"Well, I'll try not to make it too easy for you, or you'll know I'm throwing the game."

They got a few rounds into the game when there was a commotion outside of the inn. The gentlemen looked up from their card game as Catherine sighed and put down her book.

"I do declare how ridiculous this is!" she said, practically throwing the book down. "Who would think in sleepy Swanage one could not read for all this noise."

"Was my snoring really as loud as that?" Henry asked, pointing beyond the windows at the sound of horse's hooves and catcalls that followed it.

"Nearly as loud," Lord Hector said, earning a sharp glare from Henry.

The catcalls and shouts came even nearer, until they were in the building, and they all turned their gazes to the door, waiting for someone to arrive through it. A few minutes later, a man ran in through the door, covered in mud, practically from head to toe, in his riding gear.

"I am so sorry for the interruption," the innkeeper said with panic from behind the messenger.

"Nonsense, do not concern yourself," Henry said, clambering to his feet. "I sent for the messenger."

"Lord Lakefield," the man said, stepping forward with a letter in his hands. "For you."

He snatched up the letter and broke it open quickly, dismayed to see that it wasn't the Duke's handwriting, but Lady Minnow's.

'Dear Lord Lakefield,

I understand you have written a letter to the Duke of Huntingdon that has arrived this afternoon. Well, I presume it must have been something rather urgent to have sent it by express messenger! I am afraid the Duke left Exeter just yesterday. I believe he intended to make a stopin Honiton to see a friend before he will join you in Lyme Regis.

I sent your messenger onto Honiton next in the hope that he might be able to catch up with the Duke.

I understand from my dear Arthur that you are staying behind in town because of a horse injury, and perhaps a certain lady. I hope it is the lady that keeps you so long!

Send my love to Arthur.

Yours etcetera,

Lady Dianne Minnow.'

"Dianne sends her love," Henry snapped the words, feeling the anger seething in his stomach as he passed it to Lord Hector.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"See what else she has to say."

As Lord Hector read the letter, Henry realized that the messenger in front of him was fishing in his other pockets, searching for something.

"Wait…" Henry paused, looking at him. "Do you have another letter?"

"Yes, my Lord," the messenger said, eventually finding it in a pocket in the inside of his jacket. "I managed to find the Duke of Huntingdon in Honiton in the end. He sent you this."

Henry snatched the letter hurriedly and opened it, almost tearing the parchment in his eagerness.

'To Lord Lakefield,

What a surprise it was to get your letter! And rather too late, I must add. I am already well on my journey to you and have decided to spend an evening with a friend in Honiton tonight. I shall set off again tomorrow

morning in order to be with you.

Have no fear that I will find Swanage boring…'

Henry paused and looked up from the letter, struggling to swallow his anger. He had tried to delay the Duke by claiming the town was dull and they'd be leaving in a matter of days, clearly his excuse hadn't worked.

'I am sure with your company and Lord Hector's there will be enough to entertain me. From what I hear, a past acquaintance of ours resides in the town too. I do hope Miss Kingston will find it in her heart to spare me another few minutes in her company.

Yours etcetera,

Charles Wesney, Duke of Huntingdon.'

Henry felt sick as he lowered the letter and proffered it for Lord Hector to read next.

"Good god…he is not a subtle man, is he?" Lord Hector said as he read the letter.

"What is it? What does he say?" Catherine asked, jumping to her feet. She crossed the room and reached out to take the letter, but as she took hold of it, Henry took it cleanly out of her hands and held it aloft in the air, out of reach.

"Believe me, Aunt, you do not want to read that. The insinuation is enough to turn my stomach, I do not doubt it will turn yours too."

"I do not doubt it will," she said and poked him in the stomach. "But I am a lot older than you, dear, and have a lot of life experience. It might surprise to know all that I have read of in my life. Now, give it here." Reluctantly, he lowered the letter so she could take it. After she read it, she thrust it back into his chest. "Foul man," she muttered and walked back across the room.

Henry thanked the messenger and paid him well, seeing that there would be no more need of his services.

"Well, we cannot stop him coming. So, what do we do now?" Lord Hector asked.

“We’ll keep our distance from Miss Kingston,” Catherine said decisively, striking the arm of the chair with the decision. “Then the Duke will have no choice but to stay away from her.”

“That is not enough,” Henry said, shaking his head. “Somehow, I do not doubt that the Duke will make his footman enquire about town until he can find for himself where Miss Kingston resides. No…she is not safe whilst that man is on his way.”

“Then what will we do, Henry?” Catherine asked, her tone sharp and sudden. “I will never forgive myself if we bring that man back to her door. There must be something we can do about this.”

“There is only one thing we can do. I must warn her.”

Chapter 16

Sarah was almost happy with the painting. Almost. Yet no matter how many times she looked at the painting, she couldn't figure out what was wrong with it.

"Oh, mother, I need your thoughts now." She sighed as she sat back from the canvas on her painting stool. With the crack of dawn, Anne had been up and out to walk with a few friends, leaving Sarah alone with her painting as the sunlight rose over the ocean and dipped through the front window of the sitting room. "Something just isn't right about it."

She lifted her paint brush another time, painting a little extrawhite light on the castle and turning her attention to the cream dress she had been wearing that day, painting it with a little more flourish and wind in the skirt. She was so absorbed in the painting that she never noticed someone was running up the driveway toward the house. She was only alerted to their presence when there was a heavy knock on the door, bold and insistent.

Sarah dropped her paintbrush at the insistent sound and scrambled to pick it up off the sheet she had lowered across the floor. A second later the maid appeared in the corridor, visible beyond the sitting room door and looked at Sarah with wide eyes, clearly alarmed at the heaviness of the knocking. Before either of them could say anything, just gazing at each other, the visitor knocked again, even louder. The maid flinched and hurried to open the door.

Sarah dropped her paintbrushes into some water nearby and stood to her feet, trying to wipe off the paint splatters from her fingers onto her painting apron.

"Who may I say is calling – oh my goodness!" the maid exclaimed in panic and hurried back from the door. Sarah snapped her eyes up, seeing Henry hurrying past the maid and straight into the sitting room.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, freezing with her hands still bundled up in her apron.

"I have to speak to you now. It is urgent and it is…" He looked behind him at where the maid was in the doorway. "It is a private matter."

Sarah took the hint.

“Could you bring us some tea please?” she asked the maid who hurried away, leaving them alone. Henry took the opportunity to close the door quickly behind her. Sarah was about to point out the inappropriateness of the two of them being alone without a chaperone, then she took note of his state. He was flushed as though he had been running, with his jacket slung over his shoulder and his skin appearing clammy beneath the shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. “There is something wrong, isn’t there?”

“Incredibly wrong,” he said, turning back to look at her as he flung his jacket down off his shoulder. He was breathing heavily, catching his breath from having ran.

“Did you run all the way from the inn?”

“I had to. I couldn’t come last night when I got the news, so I had to come first thing this morning.”

“This morning? For what?” she asked.

“Sarah, this is very grave, but…” he trailed off and his eyes flicked behind her. The transformation was so sudden that she struggled to follow it. He went from being frantic and panicky to his eyes widening and being perfectly still.

“Oh no.” She sighed, realizing what it was he had his eyes on.

He stepped around her and looked at the painting. She placed her hands on her hips, gripping them in anger at herself. She should have hidden it before, but there was little point in trying to hide it now. He had seen it!

“It’s us,” he said softly, pointing at the painting. She didn’t answer, but she hung her head a little. “My aunt is right…you have improved incredibly. It’s a painting that belongs in the Somerset House gallery.”

“Do not flatter me.”

“I am not, believe me. It is the truth.” He stretched out a hand as though he would touch the painting, but he kept his fingers a little distance away, just tracing the outline of the two figures. “Why paint

this, Sarah?"

"No reason," she said hurriedly, pretending to busy herself with tidying her paintbrushes.

"No reason?" he asked. "It's us, is it not? Why paint this?"

"Because it was a frightening moment."

"The moment doesn't look frightening. Not the way you have painted it. It looks…thrilling." His words made her eyes snap up to the painting, knowing he had described it perfectly. With the wind and the precipice so close amongst the dramatic scenery, it was an enthralling painting to look at. "Please tell me you do not spend your days painting pictures that have the two of us in them?" he asked quietly.

"I can promise you, I do not." She turned away again, moving to her sketchbook and her paintbrushes. He followed her. Before she could close the sketchbook, stopping him from seeing what drawing it was laid out on, he placed a hand down, keeping the sketchbook open. She snatched away, almost afraid to touch him again.

"I couldn't see this properly last time," he murmured as he stared at the sketch. It was of the view of the rockpools. "It's me, isn't it?" he asked, tracing his figure walking there. "It's me!"

"Henry, please stop."

"How do you expect me to ignore that?" he asked, pointing between the sketch and the painting. "You're putting me in your pictures."

She reached out, grabbed hold of the sketchbook and took it away from his hands, closing it again.

"You must have ran all the way here for a reason," she said, trying to hold onto her composure. "What was the reason?"

He turned back to face her properly, looking more than a little in anguish.

"It is the Duke of Huntingdon. He is on his way to Swanage. He is expected to arrive any minute."

“What did you say?” Sarah asked.

Henry[AJ1] could see her thoughts on her face. There was a mixture of anger and fear lodged there, with the widening of her eyes and the way she stepped back from him.

“The Duke of Huntingdon –”

“Oh my god.” She cut him off and threw her hands up over her eyes, blocking out her view of him. It made Henry ache, stepping toward her again. “I didn’t hear you wrong. He is coming. Here. Why?” She lowered her hands. Instead of sadness swimming in those eyes there was pure fury. “Why on earth is he coming here?”

“I was to do some business with him in Exeter. Lord Hector wrote to him and mentioned we had met you –”

“Why did he do that!?” Sarah wailed, moving even further back from him.

“I never told him it was the Duke who had accosted you two years ago,” he said, struggling to explain himself as he stepped toward her. She took an equal step back, clearly refusing to let him get much nearer. “He had no idea he was doing anything wrong. I tried to top him. I wrote to the Duke, telling him not to come, but it did no good. He was already on his way here and he is expected to arrive any minute.”

Sarah darted away from him, whipping her head around so that all he could see was the back of her head. Her shoulders quivered for a minute, as though she were holding back tears.

“You said business.”

“What?” He didn’t quite follow her words.

“You said you were to discuss business within him in Exeter. Are you telling me that after what happened two years ago, you have a business venture with this man?” She didn’t turn back to face him. She kept her back firmly to him instead.

“It was started by my father.” He moved toward her again, reaching

out and gently touching her shoulder, but she shrugged it off instantly, whipping her head back round to face him.

“Then why did you not put an end to it?”

It was a question he did not know how to answer, for he was uncertain why himself. Especially when she was looking at him in such a way, with tears glistening in her eyes.

“Henry?” she said his name, clearly expecting an answer. “How could you engage in business with him after what happened? How could you have *anything* to do with him?”

The questions were asked even more insistently this time, forcing him to lift his hands up and brush them through his hair in stress.

“By the time I inherited the business ventures, you were gone, Sarah.”

“So, you thought you’d forgive him for what had passed?” she asked angrily, stepping toward him.

“What? No! I have never forgiven him for what happened. Never even accepted what he did. I hated him for it. But…”

“But what? But he made you money? So, you decided the past was in the past so you could just forget what had happened?”

“I never forgot it!” he insisted, striding forward and reaching out toward her. He took her hand before she could wrench it away from him and used it to hold tightly to her, clutching it within both of his hands. “I could never accept what he did to you.”

“You have though, haven’t you?” she asked, those tears still in her eyes though she was refusing to let them fall. “If you truly could not forgive him, you would hate him as much as I do. You would dread hearing his name every day as I do.”

He hung his head a little, feeling the shame of what he had done.

“I still have nightmares about that night, you know.” Her words made him hang his head even further, down toward her hand that he still had clasped in his own. “I can never forget it.”

“No,” he said, not wanting to imagine it could be the truth. “We

stopped him though, before he could…"

"Yes, but it is the fear. The fear is still there, it will always be there. I was alone with him, Henry. Against my will. When he tried to do…" she trailed off, hiccoughing as she stopped her tears. "The Duke ruined any chances you and I had of being together."

"Did he?" Henry asked, looking up at her again, seeing that his words made her frown. "We could have been together. We could have weathered the storm, but you ran. You never gave me that chance to be with you."

"Your father never would have let us be together, would we?" she asked, knowingly. The words made him grimace, for they were the truth. He had no other objection to make, so just stayed quiet. "Did you look for me after I left?"

"I did," he said softly.

"How hard?" The pause that followed her spoke volumes. "Not that hard then."

"I did look, but my father soon made it clear I had to stop. That I couldn't be connected with you because of what happened."

"Exactly," she said, pulling her hand out of his. "The Duke stopped any chance we have of being together, and yet you continue to see him? Reputations matter. They matter just as much to you though you pretend that they do not."

"That is not true!"

"Isn't it? Then why maintain your connection with the Duke? If you put me above the idea of reputations, then you would have risked your own reputation to break off the business venture and never see the Duke again, but you have not done that, have you?"

"You misunderstand me," Henry said, unwilling to let the accusations lie. "Nothing matters more to me than you do."

"Why should I believe that?" she asked, gesturing wildly with her arms. Seeing that words weren't getting through to her, he had to try something else, in desperation. He walked toward her, watching as this time she didn't back up. She held her ground, staring up at him,

even when he took hold of her and brought her toward him, crashing his lips on hers in a kiss. She didn't push him away, neither did she go limp in his arms, she kissed him back.

It was passionate, the intensity making them both cling to one another. His hands went to her waist, holding her against him, as her hands went to his arms, clinging onto his biceps through his tailcoat. When he parted from their kiss, it was sudden, with her looking up at him in surprise, her eyes wide.

"I love you, Sarah," he said with feeling. "That is why you should believe me. I didn't end the business because I wasn't really thinking of it in that way. I was heartbroken after you left. By the time I inherited the business, I thought I would never see you again."

"Yet," she paused, still holding onto his arms. "You were still prepared to see him, though, weren't you?"

"I have hated him every time that I have seen him."

"Truly?" she asked, before shaking her head in disbelief, before he could say anymore words. "I cannot believe you."

"Why not?"

"Because if you did love me, if you truly loved me as much as you profess to, then you would not keep that man in your life. You would have ousted him from your company, condemned him for what he had done." She slowly released his arms. "Release me now, Henry." He did as she asked, taking his hands off her waist, though he felt bereft the moment he did.

"If you cannot believe me now, then I will prove myself to you," he said, finding a determination build inside him. It was not only a wish to change her words, but a desire to have her trust him, believe in him, as much as she had done two years ago before the incident had ever happened.

"How can you?" she asked, shrugging helplessly. "The Duke is coming to Swanage now. He intends to find me, doesn't he? I will have to face him all over again."

"I will keep him away from you, I vow to that."

“You cannot keep him away from your business matters,” she said, shaking her head. “How do you expect to keep him away from me?”

“Trust me,” he said, his words sharp. “If it is the only thing that I can do to persuade you that you matter more to me than anything else, then I will prove it to you.” He turned and walked out, not bothering to bow to her or bother with any sense of decorum and custom, they were far past that.

In the corridor, he pushed past a rather flustered maid who had tea in her hands and headed for the front door, hurrying down the path with the intention of getting back to his lodgings as soon as possible. He had made up his mind. He would end the business with the Duke, and hopefully, never have to see him again.

Chapter 17

Sarah felt the tears come as soon as Henry was out of the door. The maid walked in a little shakily afterwards, placing the tea down in a tray on a small coffee table, before retreating quickly out of the door, leaving Sarah to her tears in peace.

She didn't bother trying to find a handkerchief, or anything else to quell the tears, she just let them come. They wracked her body until they were gasping cries, heaving so heavily that she struggled to breathe through the tears. She was unsure which emotion swelled in her breast harder, bringing the tears. Was it fear out of the Duke of Huntingdon coming to Swanage? Or was it disappointment that Henry had never cut off contact with the Duke after what had happened?

She backed away from the coffee table, having no interest or inclination for drinking any of it. She turned instead to the painting that was still set in the easel, the one of Corfe Castle, with Henry pulling her back from the edge. She felt now as though she hadn't been caught at all. She had fallen over that precipice, into agony.

She reached forward for the canvas and wrenched it free from the easel, hardly caring if the paint was wet or if she caught some of the daubs on her fingers. She had to get rid of it. She hitched it under her arm and hurried through the door, clambering up the steps as she tried her best not to get the paint marks on the banister. At the top of the stairs, she turned to her chamber, where inside there was her other painting of Henry, the one that overlooked the rock pools in Swanage Bay. She snapped that one up to.

She had no wish to see either of them again, not now, not after what had just happened.

She crossed the landing toward a cupboard they used for storage, flinging open the door so hard that it ricocheted off the wall behind it. She tossed the paintings in, not caring if she marred the canvases in her desperation to be free of the paintings and Henry. With them safely hidden she closed the door again and leaned against it, tempted to find a padlock, anything for the door, to make sure it wouldn't open again.

As she moved away from the door, stumbling across the landing toward the stairs, she was aware of the tears dripping off the edges of

her cheeks, past her chin and onto her dress. She still didn't stop them, what was the point in stopping them now?

Henry was looking out of the window of the inn when he saw the Duke arrive. He clambered out of the carriage, he was smiling all too proudly and gazing around the houses in Swanage with interest in his face.

"Is he here?" a voice called from behind him. Henry turned to see Catherine entering the room, with Lord Hector at her side.

"He is," Henry confirmed. Lord Hector walked up to the window too, peering out.

"He does have a habit of always looking insufferably pleased with himself, doesn't he?" Lord Hector said.

"He does."

"So, what happens now?" Catherine said as she took up a seat nearby, pulling forward some papers.

"I stop him from ever going to Miss Kingston's house," Henry said, turning back to look out of the window with folded arms.

"Chance would be a fine thing." Catherine's words made Henry's spine stiffen. "Face it, Henry. It will take a lot to stop that man from going to find her."

"Then a lot it will take. I'm still going to stop it."

Together, he and Lord Hector watched the Duke make arrangements with the stables before moving toward the inn and disappearing in through the front door. Henry turned round, with his arms folded, eyes on the door and waiting for the Duke to enter. The moment the door opened and the Duke stepped in, Henry found the same usual repulsion he always felt seeping into him, only this time it was tinged with anger too, remembering the unshed tears Sarah had been fighting minutes ago.

"My friends!" the Duke said, making Henry's spine go bolt straight. "So good to see you both." He strode into the room and outstretched

his hand to shake, but Henry refused, keeping his arms firmly back. He was pleased to see Lord Hector didn't shake his hand either, but took a few steps away. "Is something wrong?" he asked. Henry shifted for a second, uncertain how to begin what he wanted to say.

"Henry dear," Catherine said from the corner of the room.

"Ah, Lady Lamptonshire, I didn't see you there," the Duke said, turning toward her and bowing deeply. "What a pleasure it is to see you."

"Hmm." She made a non-committal noise as she looked up from the writing desk where she had taken a seat. "If you are going to discuss business, please use the sitting room next door. I wish to write my letters here in peace."

"Of course, Aunt," Henry said and gestured to the door for the Duke to step out of first. His smile was a little off, clearly sensing that something was amiss, but he followed Henry's gesture anyway and walked out of the door, following Lord Hector as he led the way to the sitting room.

Henry settled his eyes on the Duke's back as he followed, trying to keep a lid on his anger. It was always the same, whenever he saw the Duke, he had to keep his fists to himself.

Shortly after Sarah had disappeared the first time, Henry had come across the Duke at a gentleman's club in town. After the drinks Henry had, he was feeling bold, and in his anger had taken a few punches at the Duke, even landing one on his jaw. Surprisingly, the Duke had not thought much of it. He was angered at first that someone had got the jump on him in a fight, but he had quickly forgiven Henry for it, blaming that he was in his cups. He never seemed to understand that Sarah was the reason Henry had hit him in the first place.

As they appeared in the sitting room, Henry was careful to put a lot of space between them, setting himself on the opposite side of the room to the Duke. The Duke sat in the chesterfield settee where Sarah had first sat to take her tea. The fact it was the same seat made Henry stiffen all the more.

Before Henry could say anything, Lord Hector took the seat opposite the Duke and spoke up.

“We will not be discussing our business today, your Grace,” Lord Hector said decisively.

“What?” he said, appearing startled looking between the two of them, before he smiled a little. “Ah! Is it a trip of amusement instead? I rather like that idea.” He clapped his hands together in joy.

“It will not be that either,” Henry said, though he remained standing, preferring this stance, as at least this way he had height over the Duke.

“You are confusing me,” the Duke said, still glancing between the two of them. “Is something wrong?”

“Very wrong,” Henry said, scoffing. “Though I doubt if I explained the reasons to you, you could understand it from my point of view.”

The Duke said nothing for a minute, but he leaned forward, his expression going from amusement to curiosity.

“Are you quite well, Lord Lakefield?” he asked, with his eyebrows risen. “You do not seem yourself.”

“I am not,” he said firmly. “I haven’t been for some time. Let us call this meeting here, as it is right now. Your Grace, return to Exeter at once. Do not stay here for another minute.”

“How odd,” the Duke said, sounding amused once again. “Why on earth should I leave?”

“Our business matter is at an end,” Lord Hector said, still leaning forward from his chair.

“Completely or for today?” the Duke asked. “Because we have discussed no business at this moment.”

“That is correct,” Henry said. “And I have no intention of ever discussing business with you again. Our business venture will be called to a close. Next week, I will make arrangements with the solicitors for my money to be withdrawn from out investments.”

“Whatever for?” the Duke asked, suddenly appearing more than just a little panicked. “That is one of my most lucrative investments, and I know for a fact it must be the same for you.” He pointed at Henry

with the words.

“The money is immaterial,” Henry said, holding his ground. “Our business is concluded. It will not begin again. Is that understood?”

“Well, it seems I have no choice in the matter,” the Duke said, sitting back in his seat again. The frown on his features showed he was not taking the matter lightly, despite the easiness of his tone. “Care to tell me what has occurred to end our business relationship?”

“It is a personal affair,” Henry said, then nodded his head to Lord Hector who stood to his feet and gestured to the door.

“Take your leave, your Grace,” Lord Hector said, holding his ground.

“I see no call for that,” the Duke said, revealing a small smile through the angry expression. “Our business may be concluded, but why should I leave? I am here now, maybe I will spend some time seeing the town instead. I am told it’s quite a pleasant little place. Good company too.”

The words made Henry’s blood boil, knowing exactly who the Duke was revering to.

Henry walked forward at last, moving to the Duke’s side, feeling his hands clench into fists. Before he could get very far, Lord Hector stepped in his way, blocking his view.

“Out of my way,” Henry said in a whisper.

“Calm.” Lord Hector’s voice was implacable, unusually insistent for someone so jovial.

“What is you two are whispering about?” the Duke said, taking on an amused tone that made Henry wince.

“Sit.” Lord Hector urged Henry to take the seat he had just vacated. Henry did as he asked, sitting opposite the Duke as Lord Hector took the space at his side. “Why stay, your Grace?” Lord Hector said, trying to keep his tone polite. “In Exeter you have friends, acquaintances. Seeing here that we wish to split our association with you, you know no one here.”

“That is not quite true,” the Duke said. Henry felt a glower take hold

of his features as he settled his gaze on the Duke. “What of who you mentioned in your letter to me, Lord Hector?” The Duke’s words made Lord Hector wince. “Oh yes, that’s who it was. Miss Kingston, she is in town, you said. We remember her, don’t we, Lord Lakefield?” The words made Henry move to the edge of the seat.

“We remember her rather differently.” Henry’s tone was dark.

“Do we?” the Duke said with a laugh. “Maybe it is time I renewed my acquaintance with her. I remember her being someone who was rather…”

“Rather what?” Henry said, his body going still.

“Rather *licentious* company.” The words hung in the air whilst Henry struggled to understand what had just happened. The insult was plain as day, crude, and completely wrong too. Henry reared forward as Lord Hector clapped him on the shoulder, holding him back.

Before Henry could even say any words, the door was flung open. It reverberated off the wall beside it, the bang echoing around them as all three men turned their heads toward it. Catherine stood in the doorway, her cheeks red, her nostrils flaring and one hand on her hip as she strode into the room.

“How dare you!?” she roared the words. It didn’t take Henry long to realize his Aunt had been listening at the door, unable in the end to stay away out of curiosity. “You foolish boy.”

“Boy?” the Duke repeated, disgruntled to be accosted so, but Catherine would not be cowed by anyone. She marched further into the room until she was standing over the Duke.

“You would dare to insult a young woman’s name so, when you were the one who attacked her? In all my days, I swear I have never met a man so selfish, so blindsided, so utterly repulsive!”

“I will not sit here and be insulted so.” The Duke stood to his feet, but he didn’t get very far. Catherine reached out and slapped him clean across the cheek, the sound clear as day in the room.

Henry smiled a little. It was brief, to see the Duke put in his place, if only it lasted a second.

“Your mother should have done that to you years ago,” Catherine said, staying where she was and shouting in his face as he placed a hand to his jaw and wiggled it around, resetting it in pain.

“Are you going to allow your aunt to treat me so? Your guest?” the Duke asked, addressing Henry alone.

“Why should I stop her when every word she said is true?” Henry said, standing to his feet. “You have insulted a good woman’s name just now. Take back your words about Miss Kingston.”

“Why should I?” the Duke said, holding out a hand why. He was clearly offended, but not in the slightest apologetic. “You remember well enough what happened two years ago.”

“I remember you forced her into your company when she turned you down,” Henry said, practically spitting in his anger with the words. “You attacked her.”

“I did not –”

“You did!” Catherine said loudly, so much so that her voice was practically a shriek.

“I saw her trying to get away from you,” Henry said, stepping toward the Duke. “I opened the door to find her in your arms, with fear in her face, terrified.”

“She wanted it really.”

“Can you hear yourself?” Catherine scoffed, reaching out to hit him again. This time, the Duke reared away, clearly not intending to be caught a second time. “What kind of arrogance to think a lady who had no interest in you whatsoever actually wanted it? You are mad! Completely mad!”

“Take back your insult, your Grace. Now.” Henry insisted.

“I will take nothing back. She retreated here, did she not? Into hiding.” The Duke scoffed. “She knew what she had done.”

“She knew you had destroyed her life. What else could she do? You destroyed her reputation, and her family’s.” Henry felt the fury overtake him. He reached forward toward the Duke, and this time

Lord Hector could not hold him back. He grabbed the Duke by the scuff of his collar, holding him up, threateningly. “You take no responsibility for it?”

The Duke said nothing, he held his ground and stared back at Henry. Losing control of his temper, Henry pushed him away, shoving him so hard that the Duke stumbled then fell over the nearest settee arm, across the seat and onto the floor. He scrambled to stand straight, brushing off his jacket in his haste.

“Leave Swanage. Now.” Henry ordered. He was aware of Catherine at his side, nodding firmly in agreement and folding her arms. Lord Hector strode forward, gesturing with his arm toward the door. The Duke turned his gaze on Lord Hector.

“I suppose you are not going to argue against this matter?”

“Why should I?” Lord Hector said. “Believe me, I’ll be making certain as soon as I reach London again that people know of what you are.”

The words seemed to hurt the Duke more than anything else that had been uttered. He stumbled away on his feet, before turning his head toward the door, making his way out. Henry wasn’t willing to let him go so easily though. He followed the Duke, trying to make sure he actually left the inn.

They got part way down the corridor when the Duke turned round. All sense of his previous amusement was gone. In its place there was pure anger and resentmentat being accosted so.

He whipped round, so suddenly that Henry reared back. The Duke lashed out with a fist, aiming for Henry that he narrowly managed to dodge.

“Your Grace!” Catherine’s voice shrieked again. She had appeared behind Henry in the corridor. “Take another step toward my nephew and I will ensure the constables here of the assault.”

“Assault?” the Duke scoffed, spitting with the movement. “This is madness.”

“Madness?” Henry repeated. “Are you not able to look in a mirror? Can you not see all that you have done? Be sure of it, your Grace. I will be alongside Lord Hector in making sure that everyone hears of

exactly what caliber of man you are. When I am back in London, I will ensure everyone knows not only what you did to Miss Kingston all those years ago, but how you deny it now. You will be thrown out of all good society."

"Willing to go up against a Duke, Lord Lakefield?" the Duke said, stepping back and revealing his first hint of a smile for a few minutes.

"What of it?"

"A Duke's word against an Earl's? I wonder who people are more likely to believe." The Duke nodded his head in parting, turned and walked away, heading down the corridor and out to the front door of the inn. As the door closed behind him, Henry turned back to see his aunt and Lord Hector stood together.

Catherine smiled and clasped her hands together.

"That was a long time coming," she said, still smiling.

"This isn't over yet, Aunt," Henry said. "He is right. Who will believe our word over his?"

Chapter 18

Sarah had barely registered that she was creating a new painting. She had hurried to set it up so much that it wasn't even set in the easel correctly, hanging off on and half off. The paints she chose were far different to any other she usually worked with. Her palette was usually light and summery, with pastels colors and bright hues, giving a sense of daylight to paintings. This one was as starkly different to her usual style as day was night.

She had painted a figure standing on Swanage beach, looking out to the ocean as they tried to traverse the sand and walk back to the town, only the elements were against them. The wind was so strong that the auburn hair of the figure was wild, falling out and cascading behind her. The dress was practically torn in the way the wind rippled it around her legs.

The star of the painting though was the sky as a storm brewed above, deep midnight blue with streaks of white lightning shining across the corners, visible just above the clifftops either side of the bay.

She had created the painting in a harried manner, with her hands twisting the paintbrushes to and fro, dabbing them in water and new colors with great alacrity and speed. She looked away from the painting every few seconds, turning to peer out of the window int the hope that her mother would be home soon.

Shortly after Henry had left, she had sent one of the maids out with a message. After her mother's walk she was supposed to take tea with the Miss Tilneys, something Sarah was now keen to avoid. She wanted someone here with her at home, someone to tell what had happened that morning with Henry, and the revelation that the Duke could be in Swanage at any moment.

She looked up to the pathway again, but there was no sign of her mother, nor the maid. The path remained firmly empty, with the dark clouds hovering above, threatening rain at any second. She looked away, back down at the painting.

Sarah knew well enough she had painted herself on the beach, trying to run and escape the storm, even if she hadn't added a face. Visible purely from the back, the focus of the picture was the person's struggle with the wind and the lashing rain. Trapped in the center,

unable to escape the eye of the storm.

There was a tap at the door.

Sarah snapped her head up and leapt toward the window, craning her neck to try and see who it was at her door, but it was too far. With hope, she dropped her paintbrushes in a glass of water and made her way into the corridor, before the other maid could get there.

“I’ll get it, Doris,” Sarah said as the maid appeared nearby in a doorway. She pulled back the front door, praying it would be the first maid returning from her messaging duties or her mother, yet the figure on the other side of the door was no woman.

It took her a moment to realize just who it was. The figure was hulking above her, tall with light brown hair coiffed ridiculously smartly back from his forehead, and a strong hooked nose that marred what some might have thought handsome features. It was the eyes though that pinned Sarah to the spot, the sort of misty grey that had frightened her so much two years ago. They were here again, staring at her.

“Good morning, Miss Kingston,” the Duke of Huntingdon said.

She flung the door closed, well, she attempted it, but the door didn’t sit in the frame, instead it was jammed open, striking against something. She looked down to see the Duke had set his foot in the gap, preventing her from closing it.

“Doris!” Sarah called back to the maid who appeared again nearby. “Fetch Jasper, now.”

“He’s gone to the market, Miss,” Doris said. Jasper was the only hope Sarah had at that moment, the rather burly gardener would have been able to hold his own against the Duke, where she could not.

The door was pushed against as the Duke tried to get into the cottage.

“No!” Sarah screamed and pushed the door against his foot another time.

“Miss Kingston, this is hardly any way to greet a guest now, is it?” the Duke asked, far too suavely for her liking.

“Doris, help.” Sarah pleaded with the maid who hurried forward. They both pushed their body weight against the door, trying to press it harder against the Duke’s foot. He let out a groan of pain but he did not let up, he only continued to push harder. “Leave! Do not come back!” Sarah shouted through the door.

“Now, I know you do not mean that.”

“Believe me, I do, oplease leave now, never come again.”

“I merely wish to speak to you, Miss Kingston.” He pushed harder on the door. This time, the strength he used was greater than hers and Doris’ put together. They were both flung back from the door, colliding with the wall on the other side.

Sarah clung to that wall, needing it to stand as the Duke leaned on the dooframe, taking up so much space that she could barely see daylight coming past him.

“Well, well, some way to greet an old friend,” he said with a leering smile.

“You are not my friend,” Sarah said. “Leave now. I pray you.” She pointed toward the door, hearing the desperation in her own voice.

“What a pretty cottage you have here,” the Duke said conversationally, walking past her. She shivered when he came near her, but he appeared not to rest his eyes on her, looking around the corridor instead. “Ah, this is the sitting room.”

“You are not welcome in there!” she called after him, but he went in anyway, chuckling under his breath.

“Miss, should I go fetch a constable?” Doris said, whispering under her breath so that only Sarah could hear her.

“Is there anyone else in the house?” Sarah asked.

“No.”

“Then no,” Sarah said. “Stay with me, please, do not leave me.” Doris nodded.

Sarah moved slowly to the threshold of the sitting room though she

didn't quite go in. She hovered by the entrance with Doris at her shoulder.

"You have seen where I live, your Grace. Now, please go. You are not welcome in my home," Sarah said, lifting her voice and attempting to be calm despite the trembling of her hands.

"I have not finished speaking to you yet," the Duke said, coming to a stop in the center of the room and latching his hands together in front of him. "I have so longed to renew our acquaintance."

"The feeling is not mutual, your Grace. I must beg of you to leave at once." She gestured out of the door.

"So soon?" he asked, appearing quite in pain.

"Yes, I must demand," she said insistently, clamping her hands behind her back in the effort to hide the trembling of her fingers.

"Ah, very well." He sighed with the words, resigned then stepped forward, toward the door. "If you would care to make room." He gestured to how the two of them were stood in the doorway.

Reluctantly, Sarah parted from Doris' side, taking a step into the room, whilst Doris took a step back, giving him the apth out into the corridor.

"Thank you," he said with a smile. He stepped forward. Sarah felt a breath she hadn't realize she had been holding leave her, thinking she had got her wish, when the Duke's hand closed around the door handle. Rather than stepping through the door, he pushed it firmly closed, so quickly that the maid didn't have time to object on the other side.

"Your Grace!" Sarah said the words with panic. He jammed a chair in front of the door, pressing it between the handle and the floor so that no matter how hard the maid pressed against the door, it would not budge.

The Duke turned slowly to face Sarah, with that insufferable smile in place.

"Now, for that…*conversation* I came to have."

“I have not heard a horse leave, nor a carriage,” Lord Hector said as Henry tried to drink the cup of tea that Catherine had forced into his hands.

“What?” Henry said, looking up and nearly dropping the teacup.

“I have not heard a carriage leave, I’m quite ceratin of it,” Lord Hector said, looking up from where he was sat, opposite Henry.

“Drink your tea, dear, you still look pale,” Catherine said, pushign it back toward Henry, but he couldn’t drink now.

“Are you certain?”

“I am,” Lord Hector said again.

At once, they both jumped to their feet and crossed toward the window, looking out toward the road in expectation that a carriage would appear at any moment and ride away, with the Duke inside. The road remained firmly empty, with not a soul walking down it, least of all a horse or a carriage.

“You don’t think…” Lord Hector faltered, not saying the words.

“He must have left,” Henry said, turning around and heading straight for the door.

“Henry, you must drink your tea, you do look very pale!” Catherine called after him. Frustrated, Henry swallowed what was in his cup, not thinking about the heat, he burnt his mouth a second later, grimacing before he dropepd the teacup onto the sideboard and hurried out of the room. “Where are you going?”

“To find out where the Duke has gone! If he’s not left, then he’s still in Swanage, isn’t he?” Henry said distractedly as he hurried out of the room and down the corridor. He could hear Lord Hector hot on his heels, following closely behind.

As he pushed out the front door of the inn, he stumbled down the porch steps, barely looking where he was putting his feet in his effort to reach the stableyard. He ran around the inn, coming across the stable boy and a groom standing nearby.

“Lord Lakefield, did you wish to ride today?” the groom asked kindly.

“No time,” he said, shaking his head. “The Duke. Where has he gone? He has not taken his carriage anywhere?” Lord Hector came to a stop at his side as he finished asking the question.

“No, my Lord. His carriage is over there,” the groom said, frowning in confusion and pointing toward where the carriage was at the far side of the stable. The driver of the carriage was sat in a chair beside the carriage, falling asleep with his head lolling to the side in sleep.

“Where did he go then?” Henry said, turning his focus on the groom who just shrugged. “Think! Did he go off on foot somehwere? Did he head down the road, go up the hills, anything!” He could hear the desperation in his voice, even coming out a little rude. He would apologize for it later, but right now, he had to get to the matter of where the Duke had gone, in as little time as possible.

“He walked off into town, I think,” the groom said, pointing down the road.

“Did he say where he was going?” Lrod Hector asked, frowning.

“Where do youthink he is going?” Henry asked wildly, running his hands thorugh his hair. He turned to run down the road, but Lord Hector took hold of his arm and wrenched him back.

“Think, my friend. The Duke is not going to go round knocking on every door in Swanage, is he?” Lord Hector said. “It is possible he went for a walk.”

“Did the Duke say anything of where he was going? Any hint or clue?” Henry asked, turning back to those in the stable.

“Not to me,” the groom said, shrugging.

“I saw him asking for directions from the innkeeper,” the stable boy said, gesturing back to the inn.

“Thank you,” Lord Hector said nodding his head to the stable boy as Henry ran back toward the inn, hurrying up the steps and into the building with Lord Hector close behind him.

It took a while to find the innkeeper. He was in one of the backrooms near the kitchens, arranging crockery ready for luncheon.

“I’m sorry about my haste, but I need to know this at once,” Hnery said, bustling intot he room and cutting off the innkeeper’s path before he could move any further around the space to finish his task. “The Duke, he asked you directions. Where to?”

“Ah, he asked about a guest of yours that you had here for tea a little while ago. Miss Kingston. He said he was an old friend of hers.”

Henry felt his legs shaky beneath him, forcing him to reach out to the wall to stabilise himself as Lord Hector took over the conversation.

“You told him the way to her house? Please say you did not.” Lord Hector was practically begging with the words, btu little good they did.

“Should I not have done?” The innkeeper was worried, shifting with the crockery in his hands.

Henry turned and ran, back out of the inn as quickly as he could, still with Lord Hector in pursuit.

“What are you going to do, Henry!?” Lord Hector cried, running after him. “Drag him out of the house?”

“If it comes to it, yes!” Henry called back. “Go to the constable, Lord Hector. We may need him.” The strength in the words was enough for his friend. Lord Hector nodded and hruried off in a different direction as Henry took to the streets.

He took the quickest way he knew, which was also the hardest, having to bank up steep hills within the town and narrow streets that were busy with people, heading toward the cottage on the far side of the bay.

Sarah backed away across the room, listening as Doris banged repeatedly on the door, demanding to be let in. The Duke stood in front of the door, blocking off any chance Sarah had to make an exit.

“You look like a mouse skulking in the corner away from a cat,” the

Duke said chuckling as he folded his arms.

“I feel like one,” she said, rounding the paitningesasel in order to put something between them. She looked to the window in the room, wondering if she could make an escape through there, but it was so small and poky, it would be a squeeze, by that time the Duke would be dragging her back into the room.

“I merely wish to talk to you, Miss Kingston,” the Duke said, taking a step toward her.

“You said the same thing two years ago,” she said under her breath, thinking back to that moment. The horror of it was all too familiar, the way the Duke had clasped a hand across her mouth, preventing her from shouting out for help as he pulled at the skirt of her dress, trying his best to drag it up around her hips. It hadn’t mattered how many times she had stamped on his feet and pushed against his chest, trying frantically to be free, she couldn’t escape him.

“Well, we didn’t finish our little chat two years ago.” He took another step forward. She clamped her hands around the easel, considering using it as a weapon to drive him away.

“We did,” she said, lifting her chin higher. The tears were threatening to come now, tears of dread. That it was all about to happen again, only this time there was no Henry nearby to open a door and put a stop to it. “I wanted no part in that conversation, just as I wish for no further part in it now. Step aside from the door.”

To her amazement, he did as she asked. He stepped to the side, giving her a clear path to the door that had been jammed shut. She hesitated at first, wondering if it was some kind of trick, especially as he was still smirking at her, with those grey-storm-like eyes still staring at her. They made her look down at the painting on the easel, before looking back up to him again.

“As you wish,” he said emphasizing the route back to the door. “Leave, if you wish to.”

She took the opportunity this time, though warily. With one foot shakily stepping out in front of the other, she moved out from the easel and walked toward the door, looking down at the chair and thinking of how to kick it away from its position.

Sarah only got half way across the room when she saw the Duke move. She jumped away, but it wasn't fast enough. He took hold of her wrist and snapped it up, using it to drag her across the room.

"Let me go!" she called loudly to him, and his fingers tightened around her wrist, in a vice-like grip.

"Now, I know you do not really want to leave so soon."

"I do! I wish it with every fiber of my body. Let me go!" She tried to move away from him, but his other hand went for her free arm and used that to jolt her back toward him, until she collided with his chest.

"Allow me to persuade you to stay."

Chapter 19

Henry could hear the screams when he was still a little down the road. They weren't just Sarah's own, but a maid's too. He leapt over the fence that guarded the garden, not even bothering going through the gate, and burst through the front door, to find a maid was banging her hands repeatedly on the closed sitting room door, trying to gain entry and failing.

"Step back," Henry said to her, gently taking her shoulder and pulling her away.

"Miss Kingston is in there. He shut her in, there is nothing I could do."

"I do not doubt it," Henry said hurriedly, reaching for the handle. It inched a little to the side in its place, but it moved no more. There was something jamming it shut. "Sarah?" he called her name.

"Henry!" Sarah screeched on the other side of the door. "Let me go!"

Henry had no reason to doubt now what was happening on the other side of the door. He drove his shoulder against it, feeling something slide a little on the other side. He geared up again, this time being certain to drive his entire body weight into the door.

It capitulated, falling away as wood snapped ontheother side. He fell into the room, in time to see a chair broken, hanging limp on the floor. He stood straight, staringacross the room, feeling he was reliving a moment from two years ago.

Sarah was in the Duke's grasp, with his hand over her mouth, pinning her in place as he attempted to put his mouth on her. Her eyes were wide, with tears in them too.

Henry had no words, but he let all the anger over the last two years fuel his next action. He leapt across the room and grabbed the Duke by his shoulders, dragging him off Sarah. He didn't release her at first, forcing her to stumble across the floor. Henry brought down his elbow, straight into the Duke's back, forcing him to stumble to his knees and at last release Sarah.

She staggered away, reaching out for a settee nearby and using it to stand, just as the maid ran forward, going to her side.

Henry kept his focus on the Duke. He didn't give the man time to recover. As the Duke stood, Henry struck him, clean across the face and the jaw, delivering an almighty blow. The Duke stumbled away, off balance on his feet. The sound made Sarah and the maid yelp slightly.

"You have a strong hit on you," the Duke said spitefully as he reared away. He lifted a hand to his teeth, clearly checking all were still in place. "You would go to such lengths to defend her?"

"I should have done that two years ago. You escaped too easilythe last time." Henry reared forward again, preparing to strike the Duke yet again as he backed up.

"Henry…don't." Sarah's voice came from behind him. He couldn't resist the pleading tone and immediately abided to her wish, falling still. He set his gaze on the Duke instead, needing to ascertain something.

"Why come after her today? Was it to see Miss Kingston? Because I defended her? Or because I struck off our business deal?" Henry said, filling his words with bitterness.

"Call it revenge if you will," the Duke said, still checking his teeth. "I knew you would be most upset if you'd heard something had happened to her again."

"Get out. Now." Henry ordered, pointing to the door. The Duke smirked a little, backing up. "How can you smile now!? You can stand assured that others will hear of this. The constables too. Lord Hector has gone to them now and I will report what you have done."

"You want to put a Duke in court?" the Duke said, shaking his head. "You do not really know the world at all if you think such a thing is possible."

The words sat heavily in the air. Henry had no other argument to make, fearing it could well be true. All the Duke needed to do was point to Sarah's poor reputation, any court, magistrate or constable would instantly side with him, when he had so much power and money.

"Leave. Now." Henry pointed to the door again. "If you do not go

now, I'll make sure I take justice with my own hands, instead of going to the constable at all."

"Until next time, Miss Kingston." The Duke's nerve made Henry take another step forward, but the Duke backed up, walking out of the corridor and through the front door, back into the garden.

Silence swathed the room as Henry slowly turned round, breathing heavily as he set his eyes on Sarah. Her dress was a little misaligned, with the sleeves coming off the shoulders. There were tears in her eyes that she still hadn't let fall, though her hands were trembling so much that they would not sit still within the maid's grasp.

"Where is your mother?" Henry asked, stepping forward. There were things to attend to. Now that the Duke had gone, he had to make sure that Sarah was unharmed and safe.

"Visiting someone. I have sent a maid already to fetch her." Sarah's words were quiet, some of the syllables coming out as small stammers.

"Could you fetch some brandy, please?" he said to the maid. "Something to settle her nerves." The maid looked once to Sarah who nodded, before going about her duties.

Henry reached out and offered Sarah his hand, unwilling to touch her after what had just happened without her express permission. She placed her hand in his, where he could feel the fingers shaking.

"Here, sit down, Sarah," he said softly, steering her to the nearest chair. She sat, though she only perched on the very edge. He grabbed the nearest stool and pulled it forward, sitting on the pouf, so that he was nearly at her eye level. "Are you hurt? Should I send for a physician?"

"I…erm…" she paused, lifting her hand away from his in order to check her body. "I think I will be bruised," she said, gesturing to her mouth and cheeks where the Duke had clamped her mouth shut. "But otherwise, I am unharmed."

Henry did not hold back with the string of slurs and curses that came out of his mouth as he hung his head forward.

"I have never heard you use such blue language," Sarah said softly.

“I failed you. I tried to stop him coming, and he came anyway. He truly has to be the most depraved man I have even known. He came because I had offended his pride, more than anything else. He called it *revenge.* It was all because I had insulted him and demanded he apologized for what he did to you.”

“I can see why a man like him would despise that,” she said, her hands still trembling as he looked up and took them with both of his own. “It is not your fault, Henry.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No.” Her tone was emphatic as she looked up to connect their gazes. “You stopped him.” Her tears came now, there was a sudden gasping breath and then they began to fall. “Had you not been here…I truly thought that this time…”

“Do not dwell on it,” he said softly, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a handkerchief, passing it to her to dry her ears.

Before anymore could be said, the maid arrived back in the room with a brandy glass, filled unusually highly with brandy.

“I wasn’t sure how much to pour,” she said as she passed it forward.

“Under the circumstances, I think this much is a good thing,” Henry said reassuringly as he took the glass from her and passed it into Sarah’s hands. “It’s good for shock, Sarah. Drink it.” She nodded and took small sips, trying to stop her tears as she drank. “Did you say Lord Hector has gone to a constable?”

“Yes, I feared the Duke was…” Henry paused, unable to say the words. “Sarah, this morning I told the Duke that I would not do business with him any further. What was more, I told him that I would make sure people knew what kind of man he really was.”

“Gossip?” she asked, raising her eyebrows over the brandy glass.

“If it came to it, scandal sheets too, if necessary,” he said, startled by his own firm tone. “I thought he had left when Lord Hector said he had not heard a carriage. It was only then we realized where he had come.”

“Why did you do that?” she asked, hesitating as she lowered the

brandy glass.

“Which part?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

“End your business with him.”

“Do you not remember the conversation we had this morning? In this very room?” Henry said, looking around the sitting room as the maid took a chair nearby, watching on, chaperoning them, despite the intimacy of how they were sat together with their heads bent toward one another. “You wanted me to end my business with him.”

“Two years ago,” she said, chewing her lip as she lowered the brandy glass. “Henry, I just couldn’t understand why you would *want* to do business with him. It wasn’t a demand for you to stop doing business with him now.”

“But you were right!” he said, leaning back from her a little as he sat straighter. “You were completely right. Every time I have laid eyes on the man these last two years I have been repulsed by him, disgusted. Why was I doing business with him? It served me no purpose and only upset you.”

“No, no, Henry,” she said, sipping more of the brandy.

“No what?”

“Tell me you did not end your business with him for my sake.”

“For our sake.” The words came naturally to him, but they only seemed to bring her more pain. “What is it?”

“Henry…we still cannot be…” She hesitated, looking toward the maid before glancing back to him. The maid appeared to busy herself with tidying up the mess that had ensued from the Duke’s attack, rearranging the pots of paint and brushes so that she did not look so interested in their conversation. “We can still never be together, Henry.”

“Why not? This is all for you.”

“It shouldn’t be.” Her words broke him. He reached out for her again, but she kept her hands away from him. “Henry, I will eternally be grateful for what you have just done for me, but nothing can undo

what has been done. Least of all now." She closed her eyes as another tear slipped down her cheek.

"I do not care about reputations –"

"But the world does," she said as she opened her eyes another time, fixing him with that keen green gaze. "The Duke just said it himself when you spoke about constables and court. No one will naysay a Duke's word in court. Just as no one will go against him in the ton either. You and I could shout until we are blue in the face that I am not to blame for what happened, but it does not make a difference. My reputation is still ruined, and you cannot marry a ruined woman."

He didn't have anything to say. His throat was too constricted, both from the pain of seeing the Duke nearly force her again, and from having her so close yet out of reach.

"If you want to go now, I will understand," she said, as she lifted the brandy glass and took a few more sips.

"No," he said, trying to speak around the pain in his throat. "I will not leave you now. You need someone to watch over you until your mother comes home. I will not abandon you."

Her lips flickered into the smallest of smiles, though it did not last as she looked down at the brandy glass again.

Henry felt himself sit taller on the stool as the words filled him with a new determination. Sarah clearly did not know just how much he had meant those words. He never intended to abandon her again, not now, not never. He would make her see that they could be together, somehow. Whilst he figured out how such a thing was possible when her reputation was so tarnished, he was not going to leave her.

He would stay in Swanage, and the only way he was going to leave this town, was if Sarah was with him.

When the constable came alongside Lord Hector, Henry had to try and keep his temper to explain what had happened. They hovered at the edge of the sitting room whilst Sarah sat nearby, still drinking the brandy to try and calm herself. Once Henry had described what had happened, the constable looked between the three of them, with a

picture of worry in his face.

“The Duke of Huntingdon?” he said the name again.

“Yes,” Henry said, not hesitating. “You can use my testimony against him.”

“It is not that, my Lord.” The constable shifted between his feet, uncomfortably. “Speaking from experience, if I may, our magistrate here is not only a friend of the local MP, but of the gentry too.”

“Meaning?” Lord Hector prompted him on.

“Meaning there is often one rule for some here, and one rule for another.” The constable looked down at the notes he had made, gesturing to it with his pencil. “I fear where this case would fall in that division.”

“You are certain of this?” Lord Hector asked, pinning his gaze on the constable. “Is the law not the law?”

“In an ideal world, yes. For the poor the law is the law too,” the constable said, nodding his head. “Yet only last year did I see a friend of our magistrate’s accused of fraud. Somehow, by the time the case came to court, the magistrate and the justice of the peace said the matter had been sorted out with a fine. Some fine! Any poor man would have been carted off to prison or transported to Australia by that point.”

“The constable is trying to tell us that the magistrate will never see a charge laid against the Duke’s head.” Sarah’s words made them all look toward her, across the room.

“I would not say never.” The constable lowered the notebook, then cowered his head at the strength of Sarah’s stare. “Maybe never.”

“There is no point going forward with the charge,” Sarah said, lowering her eyes back down to the brandy glass.

“We have to,” Henry said, crossing the room toward her. He took the seat beside Sarah, earning her gaze.

“Why must we?”

“So that we can start to change the story. Make people see the Duke for who he is, and the fact that you are a far better woman than your reputation suggests.” His words made a flicker of a smile appear in Sarah’s face.

“We cannot live in dreams, Henry. We must live in reality.” She looked away from him, up to the constable. “Consider the complaint withdrawn, constable. I will not put you in the awkward position of having to report a duke to a magistrate.”

“As you wish, Miss Kingston,” the constable said, nodding his head as he closed his notebook and put it away in his jacket.

Henry caught Lord Hector’s gaze across the room, both of them with a somber gaze. It was clearly going to be very difficult indeed to not only change the world’s opinion of Miss Kingston and the Duke, but to also persuade Sarah that she could take on the challenge.

Chapter 20

“There is still no sign of her.” Henry’s words drew Sarah’s attention.

She had barely moved since Henry had first helped her to the chair where she was sat now. Lord Hector and the constable had left, whilst Doris had pressed not only another small glass of brandy into Sarah’s hands, but a cup of tea afterwards, claiming that what brandy couldn’t fix, tea surely would.

“I’m sorry?” Sarah said, lifting her eyes to where Henry was. He was standing by the window. Since she had turned him down another time, explaining that they could still never be together, he seemed to be making it his prerogative to stay as far away from her as the room would allow, at a distance and far out of reach.

“Your mother,” he said, glancing over his shoulder at her. “There is no sign of her or the maid.”

“My mother sometimes takes tea or goes walking with the Miss Tilneys. She might be some time.” Sarah explained, knowing it brought neither of them any comfort.

“Is there anyone else I can bring to you instead?” he asked, turning his body fully away from the window.

“Yes,” Sarah said, placing the now empty teacup down on the coffee table in front of her. “Would you call on Rebecca and ask her to come please?”

“Miss Hampshire?” He confirmed, waiting for her to nod. “Of course, I will go now to her.” He walked toward the door a little stiffly before hovering there, neither leaving nor really staying, just stuck in limbo.

“Is something wrong?” Sarah called to him, watching as he shifted his weight between his feet, evidently uncomfortable. He glanced back at her now, with evident pain in his face. The mere sight of it made her wriggle in the chair, hurt to see that pain.

“A lot is wrong, Sarah,” he said slowly. “But you will not encourage me to speak of it again, will you?” In answer, she merely shook her head. “Very well, then answer me this.” He turned back to face into the room properly and gestured to the canvas and the easel where she

had been working. “Where has the other painting gone?”

She didn’t answer for a minute. She stared at the storm she had created instead, with the same greys in the sky that she could find in the Duke’s eyes, and the figure that resembled her being caught in the middle of the tempest. Even looking at the painting brought back the fear she had just felt with the Duke’s hands upon her, trying to force her again.

“I…took it down, along with the one of the rock pools,” she said, keen to be honest.

“Why?” he asked, urging her to look back at him. “Why take them down?” She swallowed through a constricted pain in her throat, feeling her own pain so strongly that it threatened her with yet more tears.

“Haven’t we tormented ourselves both enough of late?” she asked, watching as he hung his head. “I took them down, as it does not do to dwell on what might have been between us.” He moved across the room, heading straight for her. “Henry…” She spoke in a warning tone, but he didn’t seem to notice. He took the stool in front of her that he had vacated earlier and clasped her hand, taking it up so quickly that she didn’t have time to retract it, not that she wished to strongly enough to take the action, even now. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back.

He held the kiss for some time. Just a press of his lips against her skin. It made her heart ache with longing for him, especially seeing the way he kept his eyes firmly closed, warding off tears.

“What was that for?” she asked in a whisper as he lowered her hand again.

“Call it being unable to stay away or…” He paused before lifting his eyes to meet hers, so she could see the way they glistened with unshed tears. “Or call it one last attempt to show you how much I love you.” The words made her retract her hand from his at last, hurt to be the one to cause him so much pain. They stayed in silence with one another for a minute or two, before he slowly stood to his feet. “I have stayed for too long, I shall leave you in peace now. I will bring Miss Hampshire to you directly.”

“Thank you, Henry,” she said, trying to offer a small smile that she did

not feel. She watched as he bowed his head to her, a rather formal gesture considering everything that had just happened between the two of them, then he departed, leaving her alone.

The silence that followed hovered in the air too strongly, urging Sarah to stand to her feet and move to the place in the window where Henry had been standing only a few minutes before. From there, her eyes followed the path that he took down track away from her house. He didn't take the steps that led straight to the beach and the promenade, but the main track, leading into the center of the town where he could find Miss Hampshire's house. He walked without any of the usual animation that was in his step. The sight of the change in him made Sarah veer away from the window and look toward the painting she had created of the storm.

She no longer had a wish to finish the painting, for no good could come from it. Determined to try and clear her mind from some of the hurt and turmoil that threatened to consume it, she set to in cleaning up her painting area. She took down the canvas, began to wash the paintbrushes clean and even the palette too. She did not feel like painting again for some time.

By the time Henry found Miss Hampshire's house, he was restless, his body unable to stay still. His hands were constantly finding something to do, whether that was fiddling with the odd bits and bobs that he found in his pockets, or ruffling the hair back from his forehead, they would not be calm.

He had made up his mind, to somehow persuade Sarah that they could be together. Only…he had no idea how to do it. All the complaints that she had put in place were quite right. If he married her, no one would forgive her reputation regardless, and if they were fortunate enough to have children someday, then they would be tainted too.

It was a situation that only posed more questions, rather than offered up any answers.

He knocked on Miss Hampshire's door, happy to serve Sarah in anyway he could until he thought of a plan. The door was answered just a minute later, by a young serving girl who looked at him with rather a lot of surprise.

“Is Miss Hampshire home?” he asked, trying to peer past her.

“She is, Sir,” the maid said with a small curtsy. “Should I say who is calling?”

“Say it is the Earl of Lakefield. Bid her to come out if you can, her friend, Miss Kingston, is in great need of her.” At his words, the maid curtsied again and hurried off indoors, leaving the door ajar for him to stand in. He hovered half in the small house, half out, looking between the bay where the clouds had swarmed in that morning, threatening them all with rain, and looking into the house, anticipating Miss Hampshire’s arrival at the door.

The stare inside hesitated when he caught sight of a painting on the wall. He had seen so much of Sarah’s paintings recently that it only took a second to realize it was by the same hand, and must have been a gift to her friend. The painting was of a place that was all too familiar to Henry.

The way the trees were banked together in the picture were a perfect copy of those that he found in his garden back at his estate, where Sarah had visited many times, years ago. In the center of this clump of trees, there was a clearing where a more formal garden sat, surrounded by borders of flowers with snapdragons, stocks and foxgloves’ flowers. In the middle there was a small pond, topped by a cascading fountain, where the water dripped out of a small statue’s hand. It was of a delicate woman, with a hand full of flowers, from which the water poured into the pond below.

It was his garden, and it was the one place where he had stolen a kiss from Sarah all those years ago, when they had managed to hide from their chaperone.

“Lord Lakefield! What has happened?” The arrival of Miss Hampshire’s voice startled him, making him jump and glance between the painting and Miss Hampshire as she pulled on a shawl around her shoulders.

“It is somewhat difficult to explain, but Miss Kingston needs you now.” He backed out of the house, beckoning her to follow.

“Of course, I will come now,” Miss Hampshire said, stepping out to follow him. Just before she closed the door behind her, he held up a hand and pointed through to the painting that was mounted on the

wall in a frame.

“Excuse me, but…that is a painting by Miss Kingston, isn’t it?” he asked, pointing to it.

“It is,” Miss Hampshire said with a frown, clearly not quite understanding his sudden change in topic.

“Did she ever explain the location to you?” he asked, finding it difficult to take his eyes off the painting.

“She said it was a place from her past. A memory she was clearly not willing to share.” Miss Hampshire closed the door on the painting with her words, blocking out the painting completely. She moved forward with purpose, urging him to do the same. “Now, tell me what has happened.”

“Yes,” he said, walking alongside her. “Has she explained to you about an incident in her past that involves the Duke of Huntingdon?” he asked, striding up the road with just as much vigor as Miss Hampshire.

“She has,” Miss Hampshire said, showing much more seriousness in her tone than sheusually adopted.

“It is with great misfortune I have to admit that the Duke came to Swanage today. He made it his point to visit Miss Kingston, and he…” He paused, unable to say the words. “I do not know how to explain it.”

“Perhaps it is best that we do not opt for the words on this occasion,” she said, shaking her head emphatically. “No one wishes to hear such things talked of, and you have given me enough hints to make up my own mind. Is Sarah asking for me?”

“She is. Her mother has gone walking and we believe the maid that was sent for her is struggling to find her.”

“Then we must be quick.” Miss Hampshire picked up her speed, prompting Henry to nearly run alongside her, in order to keep up.

They walked for the next few minutes in silence, clearly neither of them were comfortable talking about the topic at hand, and they focused on traversing the townspeopleinstead, walking around those

going about their business and heading to the track road that led up to Sarah's house. They were still some distance away when Miss Hampshire eventually broke the silence.

"Is she how you remember her?"

"I'm sorry?" Henry said, turning his focus on her.

"Is Sarah how you remember her? Or is she much changed?" Miss Hampshire asked, with her nose wrinkled, evidently very intrigued by what his answer would be.

"She is both just as I remember her and matured, in many ways," he said, with a small smile. "In strength, she has matured greatly. In other matters too, such as her painting skills. Yet there are other things I have not heard her talk of recently, that she used to talk of often."

"Such as?" Miss Hampshire said, urging him on.

"India," he said with a small smile. "There was a time when she talked of travelling, in particular to India. She used to talk of Paris too, even Italy, but…it is as though such ambitions she has abandoned."

"I rather think she has," Miss Hampshire said somberly as they continued walking up the hill. "That being said, she still loves to talk of the places."

"She does?" Henry asked, intrigued by this idea.

"I have borrowed more than one book from her on India, for instance. I could read those books cover to cover and not know what was in those pages as well as she does." She gestured with her hands, emphasizing the words. "She wishes to go, it is merely that she has no hope of ever going."

Henry let the words wash over him. The impression they left was so sudden that he stopped walking, coming to a halt in the road. Miss Hampshire stopped a little up ahead, looking back to him with a small smile on her face. It was as though she had dangled some information in front of him, a little clue into the way that things could work out for him and Sarah.

"Are you trying to tell me something, Miss Hampshire?" he asked,

raising his eyebrows.

“No, I would never presume to,” she said, with her smile growing. “I was just imparting some knowledge of my friend to you. A life that she could perhaps love to live…if only someone would give her the chance to live it.”

Henry felt his jaw slacken as the idea settled. In India, no one would know their names, least of all their reputations. What if he and Sarah were to marry and go to live somewhere like India? It would be a life that Sarah had always wanted to know, and they could be together.

“You look as though someone has made your day, Lord Lakefield,” Miss Hampshire said, calling his attention back to her. Her smile had grown exponentially now.

“Despite your protest, I feel as though you have been trying to tell me something, Miss Hampshire,” he said, not quite able to return her smile, but feeling more upbeat about the idea. Was it possible that Sarah would marry him then? If he could offer her a life away from the English ton, a life she had always wanted anyway?

Before anymore could be said, there was a holler across the road.

“Lord Lakefield! Is that you?” The sudden voice made Henry turn his head, looking for who had spoken to him. “Good god, it is you! What are you doing in a sleepy town like this?”

Chapter 21

“Mr Appleby?” Henry said, stepping forward in surprise to meet the incomer. “I could ask much the same of you.”

“The Duke of Huntingdon.” Mr Appleby’s words made Henry come to a perfect stop.

“What did you say?”

“He came to see me in Honiton the other day,” Mr Appleby said with a smile and extended his hand for Henry to shake. Henry took it with some trepidation. He and Mr Appleby had been friends when they passed each other in the ton, but his association with the Duke had always made Henry a little wary, now more than ever before. “He talked of this place so much and how he was coming on to visit some people here, I thought I would come to see the place too.”

“Ah…” Henry said, looking around to Miss Hampshire who was hovering a short distance away. He was about to introduce her when she shook her head, clearly not interested in being introduced at all. She turned her eyes up the hill, impatient to be going to see her friend, and showed every sign of leaving them in order to head off to see Sarah. “Well, I do not believe the Duke intends to stay in Swanage any longer.”

“Do you not think so? I find that surprising,” Mr Appleby said with a chuckle as he folded his arms.

“Why?” Henry asked, frowning as he fixed his focus on the man.

“Between you and me, Lord Lakefield,” he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, suggesting he was about to impart a great secret. “I heard there was someone in particular here that he may have come to see.”

“Oh? Who?” Henry asked, pretending to be innocent of the knowledge, though the words still made his fingers curl into fists.

“Miss Kingston. Miss Sarah Kingston. Do you remember her, my Lord?” Mr Appleby said, before laughing. The sound of the laugh was so coarse and gravelly that Henry took a step backwards, a step that went unnoticed by Mr Appleby. “I remember the tales of her all too well. After her scandal with the Duke at the ball.”

“There was no scandal,” Henry said between gritted teeth.

“No scandal? You and I must have different recollections of what happened in the past.” Mr Appleby shook his head, slowly controlling his mirth. “I remember a lady who was caught in a backroom with him, seen by many in his arms –”

“Mr Appleby, please –”

“Do you not remember?” He still went on. “They were talking of her at the gentlemen’s clubs for weeks! Saying how much everyone wished she worked in one of those establishments. She surely would have got plenty of business then.” Henry felt his jaw slacken at hearing the words spoken of so openly, such gossip that even he hadn’t been party to hear. “When I heard the Duke was coming here and Miss Kingston was here too, you can imagine what I thought right away.”

“What?” Henry said, his voice sharp.

“Well, it must have been a secret rendezvous between the two of them, mustn’t it?” he said, chuckling away. “Even after all these years. Perhaps he keeps her as his mistress, hidden away here in this sleepy town.”

Henry was about to object, to shout the man down and cut him to the bone for being so unbelievably disgusting in his attitude toward Miss Kingston, when he was quietened by shouts of joy nearby. Both he and Mr Appleby turned their heads to see there were children playing in the street, some of them squealing as they were caught by others.

“Look there,” Mr Appleby said, pointing at the children. “How many of those little’uns do you expect belong to the Duke and Miss Kingston? In the last two years, they must have produced more than one little bastard that runs around this town.” His guffaw of laughter that followed was the final straw for Henry.

He leapt forward, closer to Mr Appleby and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, shaking him with them.

“How dare you speak of Miss Kingston in that way!?” he asked, not holding back in his anger.

“What has gotten into you?” Mr Appleby asked, his laughter vanishing fast.

“Miss Kingston is not the Duke’s mistress, you fool. She never has been, never was. Two years ago where they were found together, that was not a woman falling into a man’s arms, but a woman being caught, trapped there. Nearly forced against her will. Do you understand me?” he asked, shaking Mr Appleby again for good measure. Yet the man had no answer to his question. Henry released him, shoving him away so hard that Mr Appleby stumbled on his feet, struggling to keep standing straight. “You’re a fool if you’ve believed every word that ever comes out of the Duke’s mouth, or even the gossip of the ton. Miss Kingston does not deserve your censure or your laughter, only your sympathy and praise. I will not hear another words said against her.”

“It is like you are a transformed man, my Lord.” Mr Appleby was shaking his head in disbelief. “What is wrong with a little gossip?”

“Everything when you are speaking of Miss Kingston and spreading such licentious lies!” Henry practically shouted the words in his anger, forcing Mr Appleby to back up a little away from him. “Miss Kingston was attacked by the Duke. You wish to tell tales, Mr Appleby, you might as well start spreading the true tale. Tell that to all your acquaintances, and never say another harsh word against Miss Kingston again. I will not stand for it.”

“Why not?” Mr Appleby asked.

“Because Miss Kingston will be my wife someday soon. You think I will stand to let you talk of the next Countess of Lakefield in such a way?” Henry asked, breathing so fast that his nostrils flared with anger. Before Mr Appleby could reply there was gasp nearby. Henry turned to see Miss Hampshire was nearby. She had clearly hesitated from walking on after all, hovering back in order to hear their conversation. She was gasping and holding a hand over her mouth, trying to calm her surprise from what he had said.

She will be my wife soon.

He intended to hold true to his words, so he nodded at Miss Hampshire, showing he had every intention of keeping that promise. She backed up a little then turned and fled up the road, heading straight for Miss Kingston’s house.

Henry turned his attention back to Mr Appleby to see his cheeks had reddened and his eyes were darting about, panicked.

"I…had no idea," he said, trying to back further away. "She is to be your wife? I am so sorry, my Lord." He bowed hurriedly, so deeply that it was more like a stable boy bowing to a Lord, rather than a member of the ton addressing another. "Rest assured, no such gossip about Miss Kingston, I mean, your future wife, will cross my lips again."

"Good," Henry said and pointed down the road, urging Mr Appleby to take his leave. He took the silent instruction and did as asked, running off and holding the top hat down on his head tightly, to prevent it from falling off in the wind.

Henry turned away after a minute, setting his gaze on the retreating figure of Miss Hampshire as she ran up the road toward Sarah's house.

He had a plan now, and an intention. He was going to ask Sarah to marry him again, and this time, he would offer to live a life with her in India instead of England, far away from the ton and people like Mr Appleby who peddled other people's stories like they were goods to sell at a market, rather than what they actually were, twisting people's lives.

Henry considered going after Miss Hampshire and asking Sarah that afternoon, but it was not the right time. She had already rejected his affection once that day, and she was still reeling from the shock of the Duke's second attack. No, he would have to wait until the time was right.

Unable to go back to the inn and face the questions of Lord Hector and Catherine, Henry found his feet taking him elsewhere instead. He walked down to Swanage beach. As the sun came out, he took off his tailcoat and slung it over his shoulder, needing to feel a little lighter. When he reached the promenade, his feet took him off the pathway and onto the sandy beach, heading round one side of the bay. He didn't care if the sand covered his shoes or started clinging onto the edges of his trousers, he was heading for one particular spot in the beach. The place where he had seen Sarah shortly after he had arrived in Swanage, down by the rock pools.

Sarah was hovering in the window when she saw Rebecca arrive, running up the track road and the path with so much animation that her hair was falling out from its updo and the shawl she had threaded around her shoulders was falling down, practically trailing on the ground behind her.

Sarah hurried out of the sitting room, heading straight for the front door before Rebecca could even reach it to knock. She flung it open and ran into her friend's arms, needing that comfort after all that had passed that morning.

There were barely any words between them, not at first, there was just a lot of care. Rebecca steered her back into the house, holding onto her, until they were sat together in the living room, leaning against each other. In her own time, Sarah explained to Rebecca what the Duke had tried to do, and how Henry had stopped him before anything could really happen. She even went as far to describe what had happened with the constable, and retracting the complaint.

"Are you certain that is the right course?" Rebecca asked as she held onto her, still letting Sarah lean into her for support. "A charge against him would warn other ladies not to trust him."

"There would never be a charge against him," Sarah said miserably. "The constable was right. We live in a world where such men are untouchable." The words made Rebecca curse under her breath.

"It is a good job that not every man in this world is the same," Rebecca said, urging her to sit straight again. "Your Lord Lakefield was evidently extremely worried for you when he came to collect me just now."

"He is not my Lord Lakefield, Rebecca," Sarah said, looking away, down at the floor near to them.

"To his mind he is, so I do not see the complaint," Rebecca said, earning a sharp glare from Sarah. "What is so wrong with a man being in love with you?"

"Much!" Sarah said, leaning forward and resting her face in her hands. "Rebecca, we have been over all of this before, I do not have the presence of mind to go over it all again in this moment."

“As you wish, I would never pressure you,” Rebecca said kindly as she patted her back in comfort. “There is something you should know though.”

“What is that?”

“On our way up here, we ran into an acquaintance of Lord Lakefield’s. A man by the name of Mr Appleby.” When Rebecca paused, Sarah looked up from her hands.

“I remember him. He is the younger son of an earl, he is a part of the ton,” she said, still frowning as to why this was relevant.

“He said cruel things.” Rebecca bit her lip, clearly nervous and having no intention of divulging exactly what these things were. “Suffice it to say, he was spreading some gossip that would be particularly unfair and hurtful to you. Lord Lakefield was having none of it. He cut Mr Appleby off and told him never to say such things again.” The words made Sarah smile a little, touched that even after all the refusals she had given Henry, he was standing by her, trying to protect. “Then there was something else your Lord Lakefield said…”

“What?” Sarah asked, sitting straight.

“He said that Mr Appleby should never speak in such a way again, for very soon, he would be spreading gossip about Lord Lakefield’s future wife, the next Countess Lakefield.” The revelation made Sarah fall still, uncertain what to say or even how to move. “You are staring at me as though I am mad, Sarah.”

“But…that is not possible. How can he still hold onto hope when I have told him repeatedly that we can never be together?” she asked, wringing her hands together.

“Perhaps he has thought of another way for how you two can be together.”

“I do not believe it.”

Before they could discuss anymore on the topic, there were sounds nearby. Sarah moved to her feet, seeing down the path that Anne had returned. Sarah ran forward, out of the room and out the front door, just as before, though this time she fell into her mother’s hands. Anne held her tightly, clinging onto her.

“What has happened, dear?” Anne asked, the panic was plain to see. “Your message said I must come back at once.” Sarah struggled to say any words as the tears came again. Her mother wrapped her arms around Sarah’s shoulders and steered her back inside, muttering words of comfort, even though she didn’t know what the problem was.

Rebecca was the one in the end to divulge what had happened to Anne, though Sarah stepped in to ensure her mother understood that the Duke had been stopped by Henry in the end. She expected to have to explain to her mother yet again who Lord Lakefield and the Duke of Huntingdon were. It would not be the first time her mother had forgotten who they were, yet surprisingly, it was not needed.

“You remember who they are?” Sarah asked with her hand tightly clasped in her mother’s.

“I do, all too well,” Anne said with a sad smile. “I hoped the Duke of Huntingdon would never bother you again. I was clearly wrong. The only way you will be free of him, is if you are far away indeed.”

“What do you mean?” Sarah asked.

“I mean that man will never give up. Once he has set his mind on something, it is clear he intends to have it.”

“Oh…” Sarah paused and looked between her mother and Rebecca. “What are you trying to say?”

“We’re going to have to go into hiding another time, aren’t we? We shall have to find somewhere new to hide.” Even as Anne said the words, she looked in more pain.

“But…you have always talked about going home someday.”

“I know, dear,” Anne said, swallowing slowly, in clear pain. “How I wish to. Yet these last couple of weeks, with Lady Lamptonshire and Lord Lakefield around, their familiar faces have made recalling the past so much easier for me. I remember what happened all too well, and now the Duke has found you…” She broke off and sighed. “We might have to find a new place to hide. Is that not the case?”

Sarah did not know how to answer her.

Chapter 22

Henry was forced to leave the rock pools in the end, though it was with a purpose in mind. He spent some minutes there before he returned to the inn, intent on asking where the Duke was. He found the Duke of Huntingdon waiting beside his carriage next to the stable, as the coach driver prepared the horses with the help of the groom and the stable boy.

“He is leaving then?” Lord Hector said, appearing at Henry’s side.

“That he is.” Henry confirmed as they leaned on the wall of the inn together, watching the Duke take his leave.

The Duke was most impatient to be going, constantly barking orders at the coach driver to hurry up, whilst his footman latched bags to the back of the carriage that had been unloaded earlier that morning.

“Do you think Miss Kingston’s decision was a wise thing this morning?” Lord Hector said, crossing his arms.

“Wise? Well, I think she thought it was a hopeless decision,” Henry said, seeing no other way around the thought. “She is right. Without a complaint being upheld in the courts, her reputation would be ruined all the more, and the Duke would be praised in gossip for escaping a woman’s bad name.”

Lord Hector screwed up his face in disgust against the idea.

“What is it?” Henry asked after a moment, watching his friend’s expression.

“I do not like seeing a man who could do such things not getting his comeuppance.”

“I know,” Henry said with a sigh. “If you have any idea how such a man could have his comeuppance, I would dearly love to hear it.”

They both fell into silence another time as they watched the Duke order his men round, making the final preparations. Despite the smirk that the Duke had held in his features when he had left Sarah’s house, he was clearly unnerved now, just by the nature of his hasty retreat and the way he delivered his orders. He was not a happy man.

He glanced back at Henry more than once, his jaw stiffened in anger, though he kept the words to himself.

“Speaking of reputations…” Lord Hector paused and loosened his arms, turning his gaze on Henry a little more.

“What is it?” Henry asked.

“The Duke does not like his pride to be hurt. You have hurt his pride as well as his fun and his business ventures today. He won’t take that lying down.”

“I see, if you are attempting to put me on my guard by warning me that the Duke will probably now come after me, spreading gossip and god knows what stories to harm my own reputation, consider me duly prepared for it.” Henry knew it was all too possible. When people heard the stories told by a Duke and an Earl, the word of a Duke was always going to be believed much more.

“It will not be easy, my friend,” Lord Hector said with a wince.

“Maybe not.” Henry agreed. “Yet what if I wasn’t around to hear it?”

“What?” Lord Hector asked, his brow furrowing.

“What if I no longer lived in England? What if I went elsewhere, far away where something like the Duke’s words mattered no more than a bug beneath my shoe?”

“A rather nice idea,” Lord Hector said with a small smile.

“Where will you go?”

“Maybe India.”

“India?” Lord Hector said, his eyes widening. “That is an awful long way to go just to escape some gossip.”

“Ah…but I wouldn’t be going alone,” Henry said. He didn’t need to say anymore, for Lord Hector nodded knowingly and the two of them turned their gazes back to the Duke who was climbing into his carriage, eager to make his escape. As the carriage door closed behind him, Henry lifted a hand and offered a rather sardonic wave, all too

pleased to see the back of the Duke.

In response, the Duke closed the curtain on the carriage window, blocking out any sight of Henry. The carriage lurched forward and set off, at a rather fast pace for someone just starting a journey back to London. Henry didn't stop watching the carriage for some time, not until he saw it turn at the far end of the road and take the street that led out of Swanage, back through the countryside and toward London.

"Well, will you come and tell your aunt of your plans?" Lord Hector said, gesturing indoors. "Today has been a long day, you could do with the rest."

"Not yet. I need some peace first." Henry strode forward, heading back through the town.

"Where are you going?"

"To the beach."

"Again? You said you spent almost the entire afternoon there!" Lord Hector called after him. "What good comes from sitting there for so long?"

"Peace!" Henry called back. The word made his friend fall quiet. Henry glanced back only once to see Lord Hector was moving inside, whilst a curtain flickered in a nearby room, suggesting that someone had been watching him, perhaps Catherine. Yet Henry did not look for very long to find out an answer. He turned his head forward and made his path back to the beach and the rock pools, knowing it was the one place that could make him happy right now.

Sarah knew it was too late for callers, yet she went out anyway. She left her mother sat in the sitting room, reading a book, whilst she left, under the pretense of walking Rebecca home. After Rebecca was delivered safely back, her friend checked more than once she was heading straight home.

"Let me order the carriage round for you," Rebecca said with a pleading tone. "After what happened today, I do not like the idea of you walking the streets alone this evening."

“The Duke is gone,” Sarah said with confidence. “Lord Hector’s note earlier this evening testifies to seeing him leave with his own eyes. I am perfectly safe now. Goodbye, Rebecca. I promise you, the walk will do me good.”

Rebecca smiled and put up no more complaint. She closed the door and watched Sarah walk away for a few minutes through the window. Once Sarah was sure that Rebecca was no longer watching her, she headed back down the road the other way, walking all the way down to the inn.

After the innkeeper went in search of Henry, sadly he was not the one to come and meet her by the door. It was Lady Lamptonshire.

“Oh, Miss Kingston! So late for callers. What has you out and about this time of the evening?” she asked, beckoning her inside.

“Is Lord Lakefield not in?” Sarah asked, making no move to step inside.

“I am afraid not. He went for a walk to the beach about an hour ago. We do not even know if he will be back for dinner.” Lady Lamptonshire’s words made Sarah turned her head in the direction of the beach.

It didn’t matter that so many of the small town buildings blocked any chance she had of seeing the ocean from her current position, she looked that way regardless, in the hope that Henry would suddenly appear, walking down the road toward her.

“Would you like to come in and wait for him?” Lady Lamptonshire said, prompting Sarah to look back to her.

“No…I think I will…” She trailed off, gesturing toward the beach. It caused a sudden smile to appear in Lady Lamptonshire’s features. “You look very happy, my Lady.”

“I am a little, dear,” she said quietly. “My nephew has been a shell of himself these last two years.”

“A shell?” Sarah asked, astonished to hear these words.

“He’s come alive again since he found you here. I hope it lasts.”

Sarah swallowed nervously, for she had no good news to impart to Henry.

“Good evening, Lady Lamptonshire,” she said, attempting a smile as she walked back.

“And to you,” she said sweetly.

Sarah hurried off as quickly as she could, heading in the direction of the beach. She walked the promenade for some time, looking out to the sandy section of the beach and searching the faces of the evening walkers, for any sign of Henry being amongst them.

On the far side of the bay, the sun was dropping down by the cliffs, slowly disappearing from view in the dying evening light. It cast the bay in a deep burnt orange color, contrasting the blue hue of the ocean beyond. It was the perfect setting for a painting, though Sarah couldn’t bring herself to imagine what would be in that painting, for she feared she would find some sort of excuse to put Henry in the picture yet again.

She walked further along the promenade until she reached the far side where the sand became stones and stacks, and rock pools stretched out between them. With the tide so far out, she could just see a figure a little distance away. He was sat on one of these rock stacks, looking down at the pools beneath his feet, with his jacket slung on the rock behind him. It was Henry.

Sarah stepped off the promenade and slowly walked along the beach, heading straight for him. He didn’t realize she was coming for some time, not until she was nearly at his side, slipping in the pools. Then, he looked up in surprise, his eyes widening as he watched her nearly slip.

“Do you want some help?” he asked, calling out to her. She shook her head, before crossing the last distance to him. She reached out for the rock he was sat on to stabilize herself, but his hand appeared in front of her eyes, taking that hand before she could reach the rock. He used it to help her the last step to the rock and urged her to sit beside him, looking out across the ocean.

They spent a minute in silence together. The only sounds were the ocean waves rolling in and each of their breaths. As Sarah built the courage, knowing she was about to break the heart of the man she

loved, the words died on her lips. She couldn't bear hurting him any further.

"I do not believe you found me here by accident." He was the one to break the silence again, though he kept his eyes on the ocean as he spoke to her. "You came to find me, didn't you?"

"I did," she said, keeping her gaze on him. She watched the way the wind ruffled his hair and pulled at the cravat he had loosened around his throat. The handsomeness of his countenance made her long to reach out and touch him, but it would make parting only more painful for them both, so she sat on her hands to stop herself from giving in. "Rebecca told me what you said to the acquaintance you met in town. That…I would be your future wife."

At last, he looked at her, making her sigh with relief. It was somehow painful for him to keep staring at the ocean when she longed for him to look at her instead.

"I did say that, and I meant it." There was honesty in his words as he stared at her, his eyes unblinking.

"Henry," she said, breathing deeply.

"You are about to reject me again, I know it."

"Then why did you say what you said, if you know what I am about to say myself?"

"Call it persistence."

"I call it stubbornness!" Her words made him laugh. It was just a small laugh, there one second then gone, before he shook his head, as though in disbelief.

"Yes, I am certainly stubborn. I have another word for what I am though."

"What is that?"

"Devoted." This time when he kept his eyes on her, the power of it was too strong, enough to make her lower her eyes down to her lap.

"You do not intend to give up?" she asked in a quiet voice.

“Why should I when I love you? Why should I give up when you owned the fact that had I asked you to marry me two years ago, you would have said yes?”

“You know I cannot say yes now.”

“What if you could though?” His words made her look up to him again, watching as he turned on the rock more fully to face her, until his leg was bumping against her own. It was a warm touch, intimate, and one she did not retreat from.

“You are not making any sense, Henry.”

“Then hear me out.” He lifted a hand gesturing toward her, pleadingly, to which she nodded, giving him the room to speak. “What if I asked you to marry me again, but instead of offering you a life here in England, one where we may well have to see the Duke another time, or face the gossip –”

“We would have to.”

“No, there is another option.” He coupled his words with a small smile, one that made her shift on the rock, curious as to what he meant. “Come to India with me?”

“What?” she asked, certain she had heard him wrong.

“Marry me, and come and live a life with me in India,” he said, his words becoming stronger now.

“India? Why India?”

“Have you not always wanted to go there?” he asked, his hands wide.

“Yes,” she said slowly.

“Then why not experience it, as you wanted to?” He moved toward her, reaching out and taking her hand. She didn’t retract her hand. “If we married and lived there, no one would have heard our names or our reputations. You would never have to suffer that sort of gossip or talk again. We could be *free*, Sarah. Free to be ourselves and together, without the foolish ideas of gossip and ruined reputations hovering above us.”

He fell silent, looking at her in expectation of an answer. She blinked a few times, madly trying to think through her thoughts. Was it possible after all? It was tantalizing what he offered. A world where they could be free of the past and all that had come with it. Had her mother not just said that afternoon that they might well have to move on again, and choose a new place to hide? What could be the better place? It was somewhere she had always wanted to go.

“Is it possible?” she asked, her voice so quiet that Henry was leaning toward her, in the effort to hear her.

“Which part?” he asked, his smile growing.

“All of it!” she said, clasping his hand all the more in her own. “Henry, if we went to India, you could be giving up your life here, starting a new, leaving everything behind…for what? For me?”

“For us. And?” he asked, shaking his head as though it were no big deal.

“Henry, you have to think about this. It is an upheaval of your entire life! Everything would be changing, and…why are you smiling so much?” she asked, watching as his expression was taken over completely by the smile. “Henry, what is it?”

“You didn’t say no.”

“What?”

“I asked you to marry me, and this time, you didn’t say no.”

“I…erm…” she paused, trailing off. He was right, she hadn’t said no. Because the life he was offering her was something she wanted to say yes to. When she still didn’t say no, he pulled on her hand, itching her along the rock until they were side by side. He wrapped one arm around her, pulling her into his side as she rested her head against him. He lowered his lips down to her forehead, kissing her there, elongating the kiss and making her hold her breath.

“Would you like to see India?” he asked in a whisper.

“Yes.”

“Would you like to marry me, Sarah?” At his question, she looked up connecting their gazes another time. “Don’t think about anything else, just answer me that question. Start a new life with me, Sarah. Please?”

“I…” she paused, feeling her body on the edge of rejecting him another time. Yet there was no reason to reject him. In India, there was not the same sense of propriety, less rules, less reputations, and no Duke. She could be happy at last. “I love you,” she whispered the words.

“I love you too.” He angled her head up to his, stealing a kiss from her. She held onto him, winding her arms around his neck and pulling him down toward her. At that moment she wouldn’t have cared if the tide had come in around their ankles, all she cared about was the kiss and the question he had just asked her.

They continued to kiss for a few minutes, until Sarah’s pulse was racing and her cheeks were heated with a deep blush. When they pulled apart, Henry was breathing as heavily as she was, with his hair slightly mussed from where her hands had toyed with it.

“Marry me, Sarah?”

She breathed a few more times, gearing herself up to give an answer she had always thought would never be possible to give.

“Yes.”

Epilogue

Two Months Later

"Are you capable of standing still?" Lord Hector asked at Henry's side.

"No, I think not." Henry shook his head, looking back to his friend. "You were just as bad at your wedding."

"I was not!"

"Really? I could have sworn you were so impatient to see her that at one point I had to drag you back down the aisle, for you were heading off toward the church door, wondering where she was," Henry whispered under his breath as he looked around the church. It was not too busy, just the way he and Sarah had wanted it.

On one side, amongst his guests, Catherine sat at the front, looking so happy that he thought her cheeks might split from the sheer size of the smile that was in her features. Behind here, there were a few trusted and loyal friends from town, amongst them was Dianne, now Lord Hector's wife, who kept looking at her new husband every few minutes.

"I was not that bad," Lord Hector said, returning his wife's loving gaze. "I am not as bad as you."

"There is nothing wrong with me," Henry said as he turned his gaze on Sarah's side of the congregation. Her mother was sat at the front with Rebecca at her side, both smiling and wriggling in their seats in anticipation of the service being about to begin. Henry turned away from them and looked to the church door, that was sadly remaining firmly closed.

"Oh really? Then stop looking at the church door and look to your vicar instead." Lord Hector's words made Henry turn away from the door and look to the vicar who was taking up his position by the altar. "You worried she will run off?" Lord Hector teased in a whisper.

"No," Henry said with conviction. The last two months had been the happiest of his life whilst he and Sarah planned their future together. He knew without a doubt that even though Sarah had run away two years ago, she would never go again. They now had a life before them

where they could be truly happy. “Did you hear back from that editor?”

“You’re asking me that now?” Lord Hector asked, his brow furrowing.

“I am catching the boat later, I might not have another opportunity to,” he said with a shrug, causing Lord Hector to laughand shake his head in exasperation of him.

“The editor confirmed that they will be publishing the story in the scandal sheet this weekend.”

“Good.” Henry bobbed on his toes just once, elated by the idea. Now that he and Sarah were leaving England, it had made the possibility of telling Sarah’s story openly possible at last. They had arranged it for her tale to be published in one of the scandal sheets shortly after they left for India, so that everyone would soon read of who the Duke really was. Whether they chose to believe it or not was their own prerogative, but Henry hoped it would go someway to marring the man’s reputation, and at the very least make other young ladies way of the Duke. Henry despised the thought that another woman could end up with Sarah’s ruined reputation, all because of the Duke.

“We can talk more about that at the wedding breakfast,” Lord Hector said, elbowing him into place.

“Why?”

“Because that door has opened at last.”

Henry spun round with anticipation, looking to the open doorway. Sarah was walking into the church on the arm of one of her uncles, here to give her away. As the church organ music struck up to play her down the aisle, Henry felt the smile take over his face as he watched the woman that was about to become his wife.

Sarah’s dark auburn hair was piled high at the back of her head, with cascading loose curls hanging down her neck and her back. The white gown she was wearing was beautiful, with short lacey sleeves and lace that trimmed the bodice as well with a deep neckline, it suited her perfectly, and reminded Henry much of the stolen touches they had each exchanged these last couple of months, when they had escaped their chaperone. At last, there would not need to be any more hiding, from anything.

As she walked toward him, she had the same big smile on her face that Henry was certain was in his own. At the end of the aisle, the uncle placed Sarah's hand into Henry's. He took it with eagerness and pulled her up toward the altar, so that they could face the vicar together, just as the organ music finished and the vicar held up his prayer book, ready to begin.

"Dearly beloved." The vicar began, letting his voice echo off the stone walls and the pillars that separated the church pews. "We are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

Hearing the words at last that Henry had longed to hear, he clasped her hand a little tighter.

"It is traditional at this moment that I ask our bride and groom to take hands, to symbolize the union they are about to make together, but as you can see…" The vicar paused with a warm smile and gestured for Henry to lift their hands a little. He did as asked, showing the congregation that they were already holding hands. "This couple are so much in love, that they have beaten me to it."

There was a soft laugh that rippled around the congregation. Henry smiled too as he kept his eyes on Sarah, watching as she chuckled. With their connection, he slyly brushed her hand with his thumb, an intimate touch in this public affair. The way that she smiled back at him from the touch told him all he needed to know, she loved him as much as he loved her, and though this wedding had been a long time coming, both of them were thrilled to be here at last.

Sarah moved up to the railing of the boat, looking out tothe ocean far ahead. Portsmouth was rather different to what she had expected, it was busy and smelly, with a lot of industry visible from the dockyard, but they were minutes away from setting of now. Henry was overseeing their bags being placed in the cabins nearby as she had walked out onto deck, having one last look at the country that she had called home for so long, but soon would be a memory.

A little distance along the deck, her mother was standing by the railing too, deep in conversation with Lady Lamptonshire. Seeing how happy the two women were, laughing and chatting away together

brought another smile to Sarah's lips.

There hadn't been a moment's hesitation in planning to bring Anne and Lady Lamptonshire with them. Both ladies were looking forward to doting on grandchildren some day, and they could hardly do that from half way across the world. Sarah was keen not to ever be far away from her mother now too. Whilst Anne's memory was still a little off at times, and probably would be forever more, it was clear to see what brought things back was the familiarity of people she knew. With Sarah, Lady Lamptonshire and Henry at her side, recalling things was so much easier.

Lady Lamptonshire too had made it clear from the offset that she had no intention of being left behind. She was coming to start their new life with them, even if she was a little nervous of how hot it would be in India.

"Lost in thought, love?" Henry's voice startled Sarah. She turned to see him walking toward her, with that same happy smile on his face that had been there ever since she had promised to marry him as they sat by the rock pools.

"I am," she said, pointing toward their family. "I was thinking of how happy they look."

"They are not the only ones," he said as he looped an arm around her waist, pulling her into his side. They stayed there, leaning against one another with Sarah's body nestled against his side as they looked out to the ocean. "Ready to start our new life?"

"You have no idea how much!" she said, giggling. "I think I ran out of the church so fast this morning, in eagerness to be here, that the vicar had to dart out of my way."

"He was rather startled." Henry agreed. "I have never seen a vicar's eyebrows raise so highly." She laughed all the more at the idea. "I like to see you so eager," he said, whispering to her as he placed a small kiss to her temple. "Is there nothing you will miss about England though?"

"Rebecca," she said with feeling. "We have promised to write often, but it is not the same. I will miss her greatly."

"Then we must arrange for her to come and visit some time."

“Dear, she may not be able to afford such a thing.” Sarah shifted between her feet with the words. It cost a lot of money to get to India and back, after all.

“Then we will pay for her tickets for her.”

“You would do that?” Sarah asked, looking up at him.

“I would,” he said. “I would do it without hesitation when I can see how it makes you smile so much.”

“I do love you,” she said with a giggle.

“I love you too.”

He was leaning down toward her, just as she leaned up, in hope of another one of those kisses.

“None of that here.” Lady Lamptonshire’s words made them both lean away from each other again, with humored smiles as they turned to see Anne and Lady Lamptonshire approaching them.

“Aunt,” Henry said warningly, but just received an even more warning gaze from his aunt in reply. “Very well,” he said, though he still didn’t release Sarah, much to her amusement.

“Anne says I should confess something to you.” Lady Lamptonshire looked quite put out by the idea, but Anne smiled and waved her on.

“Confess what?” Sarah asked. “To Henry?”

“To both of you,” she said. Despite the clear uncomfortableness, there was a smirk in her features as well, suggesting she was rather pleased with herself.

“Go on, Aunt,” Henry said, his tone suggesting a little wariness. Lady Lamptonshire looked one more time to Anne who waved her on again before she spoke up.

“Some months ago I received a letter from a friend of mine in Swanage, who mentioned she had recently met a lovely family by the name of Kingston.”

“And?” Sarah said, not seeing the point of the discussion.

“Aunt…you did not…” Henry clearly did see the point though, for he had stood a little taller and was gazing heavily at his aunt.

“Well, once I heard where Sarah was, I had to make sure you went to Swanage, didn’t I?” she said, looking very pleased with herself.

“You mean all that rubbish about wanting to see the place as you hadn’t seen it since you were a child was just that? Rubbish? A lie?” he asked, the surprise growing by each second.

“Yes,” she said, clapping her hands together in delight. “Do not be angry at me, Henry.”

“You meddled, Aunt!”

“Do not be angry though. I’d say all the smiles you two have these days was worth a little meddling.”

“I am not angry, Aunt,” Henry said, suddenly laughing.

“You’re not?” Sarah asked, looking to him in surprise.

“How can I be?” he asked, lifting a hand and brushing a curl of Sarah’s hair behind her ear. The delicacy of the touch made her wriggle in pleasure. “Aunt, I’m beginning to wonder what I would do without you.”

Based on how happy Sarah was feeling at this moment, she couldn’t help but nod in agreement. Lady Lamptonshire had brought them together again and she couldn’t be more grateful for someone meddling in her business, for it had given her a life to look forward to now, rather than one where she was constantly looking over her shoulder.

THE END

Can't get enough of Sarah and Henry? Then make sure to check out the

Extended Epilogue to find out…

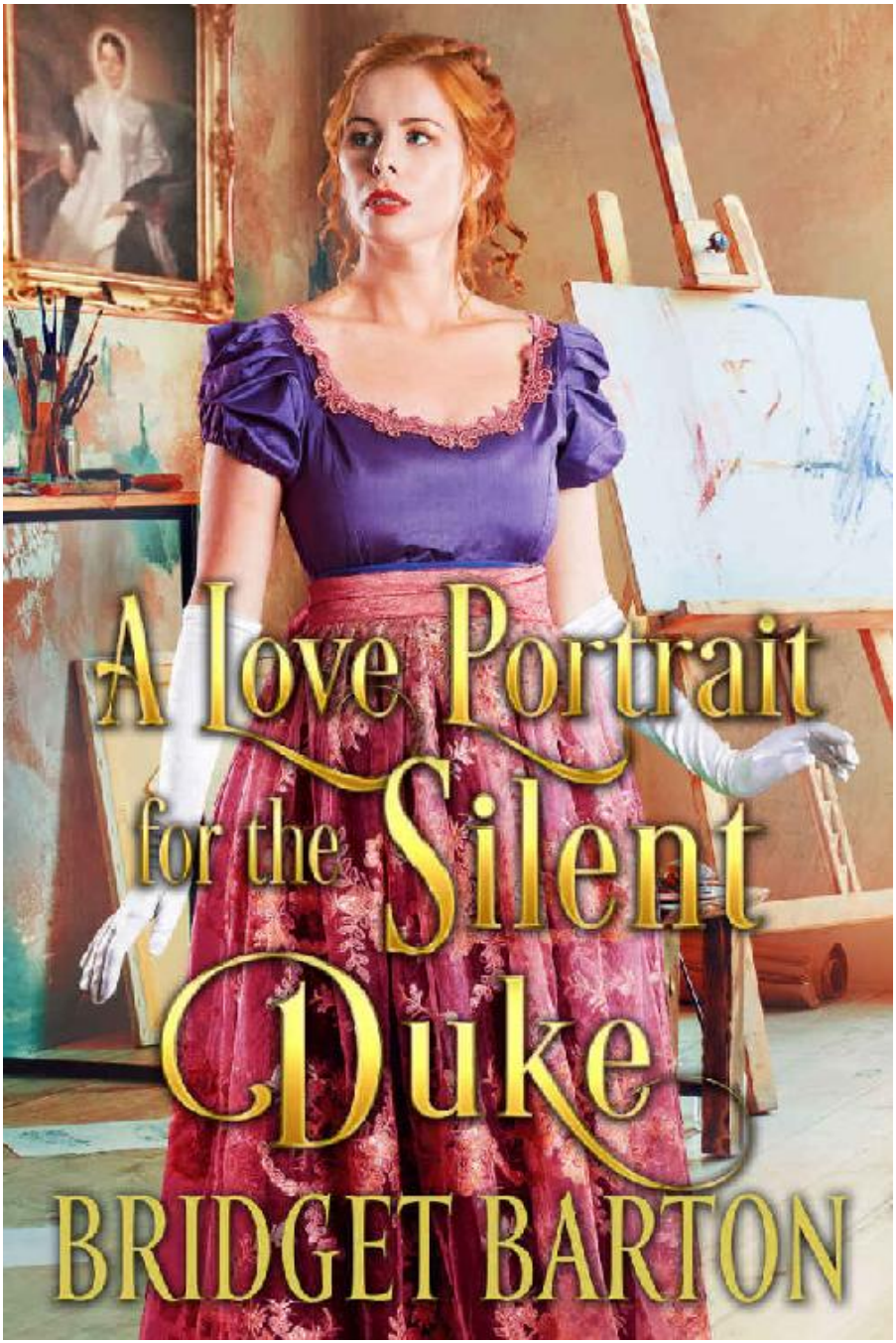
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(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from ***"A Love Portrait for the Silent Duke"****, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


A Love Portrait for the Silent Duke
BRIDGET BARTON

A Love Portrait for the Silent Duke

Introduction

Following the sudden death of her beloved father, the spirited and kind Lady Selina Langley finds herself impoverished and homeless. In desperate need of an income for both her and her sister, Selina has no choice but to put her pride aside and seek employment. Luckily, she will be able to make her way in life by painting portraits for a tormented gentleman, who will draw her attention at their very first encounter. However, deep inside she knows that a match with a man of his stand and a fallen woman like her will always remain a foolish dream. With her unique talent and kindness, will Selina find the way to steal the charming nobleman's heart? In the end, will she put her struggling past behind and find true love and happiness despite the odds?

When Lord Graham Hancock, the brave and gallant Duke of Westcott, returns injured from the war, he withdraws to his own world, struggling to adjust back into society. To make matters worse, his fiancée breaks off their engagement, as she is embarrassed by his presence. She refuses to be associated with someone who lost the ability to speak, and prefers to stay aside from the crippling nightmares he now endures. Soon, everything will change for the lonely Duke, when he meets the mesmerising woman, who is hired for his portrait and is about to replace what haunts his dreams. As he spends more time with her, she gives him the hope that life is far from

over for him and he realises that she is the only person who can brighten even his gloomiest days. Will the silent Duke find a way to declare his genuine love to Selina? Or will he suppress his feelings out of fear and condemn himself into an eternal misery?

Selina and Graham's hearts start to heal when they discover that they have found everything they were looking for in each others' eyes. Everything crashes down though, when Graham's mother banishes Selina from the house and convinces his ex-fianceé to return and ask for his forgiveness. Will Graham find the heartbroken Selina and make the right decision at the most critical moment of his life by convincing her that she is the true love of his life? While external forces are threatening to steal their chance at happiness forever, will the two of them fight for their feelings and choose the path of their own life?

Chapter 1

Westcott Villa, London, 1812

The Right Honourable Lord Graham Hancock, Duke of Westcott, stared out of the rain-streaked window at the street below. Large puddles had formed where the cobbles were unevenly laid or where the stones had begun to subside, carriage wheels splashing through them and soaking anyone walking by.

Not that many people were simply walking by. More likely, they dashed along the pavement, beneath big black umbrellas, trying to avoid their own puddles or even, in some cases, the very rain falling from the sky.

A fire blazed and popped in the hearth behind Graham, and his mother, Lady Edith, the Dowager Duchess, sat in an armchair beside him. She had not uttered a word to him since breakfast time, had simply worked at her embroidery hoop, and occasionally looked up to glance out of the window. Before he had gone away to war, it was rare to see his mother in the drawing room before noon. Now she claimed she was keeping him company, but it was no different to when she had remained in her own rooms upstairs.

The clock on the mantelpiece bonged eleven times, indicating that the visiting hour was upon them. But as there were no young ladies in the house, no visitors were expected.

Graham sighed heavily, causing his mother to glance up from her sewing before returning her attention to the fabric in front of her once more. He leaned forward slightly to scratch at an itch at the nape of

his neck, then slumped back heavily into his chair.

I am so bored! he thought to himself. I can't even acknowledge anyone walking by. They are all either hiding beneath their umbrellas, or they don't look up to see me at the window. He sighed again. His eyelids drooped drowsily, and he closed his eyes, allowing sleep to overcome him. After all, it was better than being bored.

A flurry of skirts and a rustle of silk beside him woke him from his nap with a start.

"Do wake up, Graham," said his mother, leaning forward and sticking her needle safely into the fabric of her embroidery. "We have a visitor." Without waiting for his response, she jumped up and moved instead to an arrangement of seats in front of the fire from where she could face the door to the room.

Graham rubbed his eyes, stretched, and looked out of the window. Sure enough, a carriage awaited at the bottom of the steps. He watched as Jackson, their butler, held an umbrella aloft to protect the lady alighting from the vehicle.

He sighed again but nevertheless stood up and joined his mother on the settee in front of the fireplace, limping slightly as he crossed the floor. Together they waited. A visitor was surely most welcome to help relieve his boredom, but perhaps not necessarily this visitor at this time. It is too soon, he thought.

The door to the room burst open, and in walked Jackson. Instead of addressing Graham, however, he addressed the dowager duchess.

“Lady Emmeline Broughton, Your Grace,” he announced, nodding his head slightly.

Lady Edith stood up and said, “Thank you, Jackson.”

The butler stood to one side as the lady duly entered the room in a rustle of pink silk. She was closely followed by a slightly older woman, somewhat dourly dressed in grey.

Lady Emmeline hesitated for just a moment before sweeping towards Graham with enthusiasm, a bright smile upon her pretty face. He merely stood stiffly to greet her, clicking his heels and bowing over her outstretched hand to kiss her gloved fingers. Then she turned to Lady Edith and curtsied before indicating the woman who had come in with her.

“May I introduce my chaperone, my distant cousin, Your Grace?” she said. “Miss Mary Broughton.”

Lady Edith nodded at the chaperone’s curtsy before the woman crept to stand against the wall. She did not sit until she was given permission.

“My dear Emmeline,” said the dowager. “You have no need of a chaperone when you are already engaged to my son. And in any case, I shall be with you the whole time.” She turned to the butler, who was waiting for further instructions. “Do take Miss Mary down to the kitchen, Jackson, and ask Cook to make her a pot of tea. Then Cook may send us a tray up.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” said the butler, bowing his head. He turned to Mary. “Do come with me, miss.” He closed the door tightly to behind them.

When she was quite certain that the butler and the young woman were out of earshot, Lady Edith said, “My dear, why on earth did you bring a chaperone?” She said the word ‘chaperone’ with a little distaste.

“She is not really my chaperone,” replied Lady Emmeline. “She is a poor cousin who has fallen on hard times. If she accompanies me as my unofficial chaperone, she has a chance to enjoy at least some aspects of polite society. I do feel so very sorry for her. It is the least that one can do.”

“You are most generous,” said Lady Edith. “Please, my dear. Do be seated.”

She indicated the settee next to Graham. When he glanced away and made a point of taking up almost the entire settee himself, the dowager adjusted and pointed to a pair of armchairs instead.

Lady Emmeline hesitated again before joining her future mother-in-law beside the fire. “How are you, my love?” she asked Graham. He shrugged his shoulders and stared into the flames of the fire. “You must tell me all about your recent journey,” she said. Still, he ignored her, this time looking to his mother for help.

Puzzled, Lady Emmeline also looked at his mother. “Did I do something to offend His Grace?”

Lady Edith patted her hand and said, “No, no. Not at all, my dear. But Lord Graham was ... injured in battle ...” She drifted off.

Lady Emmeline’s head snapped around to face him, and her big blue eyes examined him from head to foot. She turned back to his mother. “But ... but ... I do not see any injury,” she said. “What has he done?”

And there it was. Lady Emmeline, his very own intended, had automatically stopped addressing him directly and now, instead, discussed him as though he were an ignoramus. A thing. An inanimate object. Just like everyone else he had encountered since returning from France. And before she even knew the extent of his condition. Graham fixed his gaze once more on the fire as the two women talked about him as though he were not even in the room. If he listened in silence, perhaps they would forget he was there altogether.

“He has a head injury,” the older woman explained. “My poor son had only recently been promoted to major-general,” Lady Edith continued, “when he was injured on the battlefield. Of course, they did not understand how much damage had been done at the time. But his good friend Thomas Hatcher, who you know, I believe, was with him. Carried him to safety himself, he did.”

“Oh,” murmured Lady Emmeline. “Yes, I do know him. They have been friends since childhood, have they not?” When Lady Edith nodded, Lady Emmeline continued. “Thank goodness he was there. Are we able to thank Mr Hatcher for this brave deed?”

“Sadly, no,” replied Lady Edith. “Young Thomas went back to the battle, but now he is missing. Presumed dead.”

“That is dreadful,” said the younger woman.

Graham blinked at the memory of his friend. Good old Thomas, always there when he needed him. Apart from now.

“Indeed it is,” agreed the dowager.

“So ... so ... what exactly is wrong with him?” asked Lady Emmeline. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Nothing ... too personal, I trust?”

Graham felt as though he wanted to laugh out loud, but he restrained himself, pretending instead to be stifling a cough.

“Oh no, my dear. Nothing like that,” said his mother. “Well, not as far as I am aware at any rate,” she admitted. “Although I would not expect them to tell his own mother of such an, er, ailment.”

There was a tap on the door, and a kitchen maid appeared carrying a heavy tea tray. She glanced around the room and placed the tray on the low table in front of the settee.

“Thank you, Fanny,” said the dowager. “Will you do the honours, my dear?” she said to Lady Emmeline. When Lady Emmeline nodded, Lady Edith indicated to the maid that she was dismissed.

“Would His Grace like a cup of tea?” Lady Emmeline asked his mother.

Graham tutted and shook his head lightly. I am here, you know! He wanted to shout. But no, his mother answered on his behalf.

“Yes, please, my dear. He will have it with lemon.”

But I do not want it with lemon! He felt his brow furrow with annoyance. I do not even want any tea. I would much sooner drink coffee. In fact, he would very much sooner have a glass of whiskey, but it was still too early in the day.

Once the women had finished fussing over the refreshments, Graham’s fiancée pressed his mother for more information.

“You were saying, Your Grace?” she prompted.

“Ah, yes. Well, when he came to – he was unconscious for several days – he had completely lost the power of speech.”

“You mean —”

“I mean, my dear, the events of that day literally left my son speechless!”

Graham noticed for the umpteenth time the self-satisfied look on Lady Edith’s face when she said that. He had heard his mother say it to so

many different people by now that it no longer amused him. It did not appear to amuse his fiancée either.

“That is awful,” said Lady Emmeline. “Has he seen a doctor since he has been home?”

“Yes. The family doctor consulted a specialist right here in London, who examined my son most thoroughly.”

“And what did he say, Your Grace?”

“He said that Lord Graham must have suffered a great trauma on that day and that he has been left without his voice.”

“But is there anything that can be done for him?”

Lady Edith spread out her free hand. “The doctors do not know.”

“Does this mean that he is ... simple?” asked Lady Emmeline.

Graham’s head shot around to look at her when she said that, and he immediately saw the look of shame on her face when she realised he had actually understood her. He reached out to touch her hand, but she pulled it back sharply.

“No, my dear,” soothed his mother. “He still has all of his faculties. He

can write and communicate and read. And he understands everything that is going on around him. He is also more than capable of managing the country estate and the London home, but he is happy for me to help him with that for the time being – with his complete knowledge, of course. He does not seem to remember what happened on that terrible day. He is simply unable to speak. It is a tragedy."

The look of disgust on Lady Emmeline's face told Graham that she believed it was a tragedy of quite a different meaning, and it should have broken Graham's heart. Instead, he was glad to see precisely how shallow she truly was.

"He will not be able to go out in society, then, surely?" she asked.

"There is no reason why that would be the case," said his mother. "He simply has no desire to at the moment."

Nor will I ever again, he thought to himself.

Suddenly, Lady Emmeline finished drinking her tea so quickly it would be deemed unladylike had they been in any other company than themselves. She stood up and clattered her cup and saucer onto the tray.

"Well," she said. "I had better be off."

"So soon?" asked Lady Edith. "You have only just arrived."

“I am afraid that I must. I have, er, a very pressing engagement. I cannot be late.”

“Very well, my dear,” said Lady Edith, also coming to her feet. “It was very nice to see you … was it not, Lord Graham?” She tapped his foot with her own, prompting him to also stand rather belatedly.

The dowager duchess went to the fireplace and pulled on the service cord, but their visitor was already on her way out through the door. “Do not trouble the servants,” she said over her shoulder. “I will collect Miss Mary from the kitchen and ask Mr Jackson to summon the carriage.”

And in a cloud of expensive floral scent, she was gone.

“Well,” said Lady Edith, quite clearly affronted.

Graham simply shrugged and resumed his former seat next to the window.

“I do hope she will still be coming to our dinner party later in the week,” said his mother, pulling the curtain to one side so she could watch Lady Emmeline’s carriage drive away. Then she too resumed her former seat and returned to her sewing.

Chapter 2

Graham glanced around the table at his mother's guests, for they were her guests and not his. She had not even consulted him. Yet the dinner party had been foisted upon him anyway, regardless of whether or not he wanted to attend.

As the conversation buzzed around him, he allowed himself to drift off. He had suffered a bad dream during the night, reminding him of the terrors and the devastation of war. He had been wandering on the battlefield looking for his friend, Thomas. The ground had been littered with dead bodies, but they were in French uniforms and not British. Every time he'd turned a body over, he'd seen a face he recognised but could not place. The same face, over and over again.

He shook his head to rid his mind of the non-memories and tried to tune in to those around him. The elderly Lady Ponsonby, to his right, was talking to the middle-aged fop Lord Oberon facing her, telling him all about her current digestive disorder.

"The wind is terrible!" she exclaimed, and Lord Oberon's face coloured beetroot red. One did not discuss such things in decent company. As if to prove her point, Graham heard a most unladylike noise coming from the woman's person. He wafted a hand in front of his face and then pretended to be rubbing his nose while coughing quietly into his palm, and he turned his attention to the lady on his left.

Lady Chesterton was facing her husband, Lord Chesterton, so they were speaking with other guests. She was telling the chap on her other side about their extensive wine cellar back at home while her husband flirted openly with the woman opposite Graham, who happened to be Lady Emmeline herself. He could not hear what they were talking

about, but she did look as though the lord was being quite risqué in some of his comments.

In a bid to distract her and rescue his fiancée from her plight, he coughed loudly into a napkin and reached under the table with his foot to tap her own, hoping he was not tapping Lord Chesterton's foot by mistake. The lord might mistake it for Lady Emmeline's foot and think that his luck was in.

As Graham's foot made contact, Lady Emmeline appeared to jerk in her seat, which suggested to him that his aim had been accurate. He coughed again, and when she looked across at him, realising who was kicking her under the table, the expression on her face changed from one of surprise to one of gentle gratitude.

She excused herself from her conversation with the lord and looked directly across the table at Graham. Lord Chesterton turned his own attention to the beauty to his right, Graham's aunt, his late father's half-sister Freda, who was actually the same age as Graham himself.

"Tell me, Your Grace," Lady Emmeline said to him. "Are you enjoying the dinner party?"

Graham pulled what he hoped was an appreciative face and nodded that yes, he was indeed doing so. If she kept it to questions that required either a yes or no answer, they would be fine.

"How have you been spending your time since we were last in each other's company?" she said, spoiling it.

At a loss for what to do, Graham simply shrugged his shoulders, and a flash of irritation crossed her face.

She looked as though she gave some thought to re-framing her next question and said, “Have you been out at all?”

He shook his head with relief and gestured to her with his hand as if to say, ‘and you?’

Lady Emmeline watched the gesture as a series of emotions flickered across her face, then she pressed her lips together before saying, “Of course, it has been raining since last I saw you. Nevertheless, my cousin Mary and I took a carriage around the park. Just to be sociable.” She waited as if for some response. When she remembered that none would come, she added, “There was hardly anyone else there of any note. And so we went back home.”

She visibly sagged as she breathed out a sigh, and she looked towards the ceiling as if searching for inspiration.

Graham followed her gaze and his eyes rested on the candle chandelier above the centre of the table. Each of the candles was the same length as the next, each of them completely new for today’s little soiree. They all had good flames on them with no splutters.

He spotted a spider weaving a web where the chandelier joined the ceiling, and he smiled slightly. Mother would not be happy with the staff if she saw it too, so he tore his eyes away and looked once more at his fiancée, whose own eyes were looking anywhere but at his.

He gazed towards the head of the table where his mother was seated, but she was engaged in an animated conversation with the gentleman to her right, who had a bright red nose. Everyone knew that the Duke of Kenilworth was partial to the odd drink or two, an attachment that caused the fine red lines that broke out upon his face as well as a paunch he tried to hide behind his waistcoat. It was good that his mother was distracted. If she was not watching Graham, then she would not have reason to think there was anything amiss with the chandelier. The spider was safe, for now. And so were the staff.

“You do remember my cousin, do you not, Your Grace?” asked Lady Emmeline suddenly, and Graham returned his attention to her.

What was she trying to imply? That he could not remember the young lady who had accompanied her only two days earlier? He may have blocked out memories of the battlefield, apart from the recurring dreams, but there was nothing wrong with the rest of his brain.

Irritated, he nodded his head just once before fixing his stare on the food on his plate in front of him. He could hear Lady Emmeline puffing and tutting, and from the corner of his eye, he could see her trying to attract his attention.

“Your Grace?” she enquired at last.

He lifted his face, looked right at her, and then pointedly and quite rudely turned to Lady Ponsonby on his right and tuned in to her conversation with the gentleman on her other side, Sir Nicholas, being sure to look as though he were listening intently and nodding and agreeing with all that he was saying.

Lady Emmeline tutted again and turned to Lord Oberon, who seemed

relieved that Lady Ponsonby had finally stopped regaling him with stories of her health.

“Do you agree, Your Grace?” said Sir Nicholas across Lady Ponsonby, and Graham realised he had completely ignored everything that the man had said. He was about to nod his agreement and hope it was the right response, when Sir Nicholas continued to drone on anyway as though Graham had agreed entirely. “I knew you would,” he said, pointing at Graham with his empty fork.

“Excuse me, Dowager Duchess,” said Lady Emmeline loudly, addressing Graham’s mother almost the entire length of the table away.

Lady Edith paused in her conversation and looked towards her future daughter-in-law with mild irritation.

“Forgive me for bothering you, Your Grace,” said Lady Emmeline. “But I wondered if I may have a private audience with you after we have finished eating?”

Graham’s mother considered the request, flicked her eyes to Graham and then back to Emmeline, and nodded. Then she returned her attention to the duke.

Graham glanced at each of the dinner guests seated around the table. What a strange mix they were. And then he twigged. Apart from Lady Emmeline and Aunt Freda, all the guests present were members of his mother’s whist society. No wonder he did not appear to have anything in common with any of them. And not a single one of them, apart from Lady Emmeline, exchanged more than two words with him – and only then if he were fortunate.

He stifled a yawn and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Dessert would be here soon, and then he could go up to his chambers and hide away from everyone.

At the end of the meal, the gentlemen present looked towards Graham, and he remembered that he would have to entertain them with port and cigars while the ladies withdrew to the drawing room. He was, after all, the resident gentleman, and there were no others there who could even step up to the role. They were all friends of his mother's, and not related.

As he stood up, so too did the dowager duchess. She turned to her companion, the Duke of Kenilworth, bowed her head, and announced loudly, Gentlemen, my friend the duke will look after you all. Ladies, I will join you in the drawing room presently." There was a murmur of voices. "Lady Emmeline," she said. "Will you come with me?"

This, of course, left Graham at a bit of a loose end as all the gentlemen completely ignored him. He watched the ladies leave the room, followed by his mother and his fiancée. The duke, his mother's friend, went to the drinks cabinet as though it were second nature to him, and Graham wondered just how familiar the man was with his home. When he was certain that no one was paying him any heed, he slowly followed the ladies through the door.

The ladies swished their skirts and chatted amiably as they climbed the stairs to the drawing room, which was on the next level up in the London town house. The dowager duchess and Lady Emmeline, however, were just disappearing into the small parlour, and he

wondered what on earth his fiancée wanted with his mother.

Torn between climbing the stairs to his own chambers and this unexpected intrigue, it was curiosity that got the better of him. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the men had still not noticed he was missing. Then he stepped quietly across the hallway and stood just outside the door to the parlour.

“Will you not be joining us in the drawing room, my dear?” his mother was asking Lady Emmeline. She had swept into the parlour but remained standing, and Lady Emmeline had her back to the door.

“No, I thank you, Your Grace. I will not be staying.”

“Then what is it you wish to speak with me about?”

From his vantage point beside the door, he saw Lady Emmeline take a small letter from her bag. She handed it to Lady Edith, who looked down at it as though she had never seen such a thing before in her life.

“What is this?” asked his mother, keeping her hands folded in front of her.

“It is a letter,” said Lady Emmeline.

“And why would you write me a letter when you are perfectly capable of speaking to me, my dear?”

“The letter is not from me. It is from Papa.”

Lady Edith sneered down at the letter again, but when Lady Emmeline held it out to her, Graham’s mother cautiously took it from her hand.

Lady Emmeline started to make as though to leave, but Lady Edith stopped her.

“Please wait while I see what your dear father has to say.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” said Lady Emmeline, bowing her head and looking at the floor while Lady Edith unfolded the letter and read it.

Graham’s mother looked up at Lady Emmeline in surprise. “Do you know what your father has written to me?”

“I do, Your Grace,” admitted Lady Emmeline.

“Then, I repeat. Why the letter? Why did you not tell me this yourself?”

“Because I am a coward, Your Grace,” she admitted. “However, it is my choice. My decision. Papa merely articulated it for me in this formal manner.”

“You no longer wish to marry my son?” said Lady Edith, astounded.

The breath caught in Graham’s throat. Lady Emmeline spun around on the spot while Lady Edith saw him standing there for the first time.

“What do you think of this, my son?” asked his mother.

Graham stepped into the room and shrugged his shoulders. Then he held out his hands in an expression of ‘why?’

Lady Emmeline stubbornly pretended that she did not understand. She turned to Lady Edith with a questioning look on her face. “What is he saying now?”

“He is asking a perfectly valid question,” replied Lady Edith. “And one that I would also like to hear the answer to. Why – why? – are you breaking off what has long been an understanding between our two families? Why do you dishonour my son and this family in this fashion?”

“Well, just look at him,” the young woman complained, almost on the verge of tears now. She turned to indicate Graham with her hand. “How can I go out into society with ... with ... that?”

“That,” said Lady Edith, almost spitting out the word. “That is my son. That is Lord Graham Hancock, the fifteenth Duke of Westcott. That is a human being who fought bravely for his country and now needs all the love and compassion we can bestow. How dare you speak as

though he is an embarrassment to you?”

Graham did not wait around to hear any more. He turned on his heel and stormed from the room, taking the stairs two at a time to his chambers and slamming the door behind him. He would be neither pitied nor ridiculed. And if that was truly how Lady Emmeline felt about him, then he had been spared a terrible future.

Chapter 3

Langley Manor, Kent

Things had happened very quickly following the death of Lord Donald Langley. With no time to put his affairs in order, the heart attack had been sudden, leaving his two daughters without either a living or a dowry. Lady Alice, the younger of the two Langley sisters, had become engaged only days before their father's abrupt and unexpected demise, which was seen as a blessing at least. But, sadly, it was not to last.

Immediately following the funeral, a procession of carriages made its way sombrely from the church to the house, each led by a pair of black horses, each with a black feather on its head. The staff waited quietly and respectfully, lined up on the steps leading up to the big oak doors, heads bowed. They had on their best uniforms and black armbands. When the first carriage came to a juddering halt, the butler stepped forward to open the door and help the ladies down.

Lady Selina Langley took the butler's hand and waited for her sister to join them. Then the two of them made their way into the house, stopping at every single member of the staff to say a word or two.

"Thank you so much, Mr Inchworth," Selina said to the butler, who escorted her while Vincent, the head footman, looked after her sister. "You have been such a comfort to us both."

"Not at all, My Lady," Inchworth replied. "We all miss the master very much."

As they stepped into the large hallway, Selina shivered. It was not cold in the house. After all, it was a warm spring day. Yet there was a chill to the home all the same.

“Are you cold, sister?” asked Lady Alice.

“No,” she replied, glancing up at the staircase. “But it is as though someone just stepped on my very own grave.” Lady Alice shuddered too at the thought.

There was a small commotion on the steps outside the door, and then their cousin, and the new Lord Langley, dashed into the house, straightening his clothes as he did so. A large copper urn sat on a table, and he admired the image of his face reflecting back at him from the highly polished surface. He licked a finger and smoothed down a curl of hair across his forehead before turning his attention to the two ladies.

“It was a fine service, was it not?” he said, a little too cheerfully for Selina.

“As services go, I suppose it was,” she agreed, handing her coat to one of the maids. Her sister followed suit.

“Will you join me for a sherry in the parlour?” he asked them.

Selina shook her head. “No, thank you, cousin. We must finish our packing.”

The new Lord Richard at least had the decency to blush at her words. “I say,” he said. “There is no rush. You are welcome to stay in the house for as long as you need to.”

Selina knew he did not mean it, for he had eagerly moved into the house only the day after the old lord’s death and had told them that he had already found them somewhere to live. She did not like the situation, but what could she do about it? It was, after all, the law.

“That is very gracious of you, cousin,” she replied. “However, you will marry soon, and we must make way for the future Lady Langley. It is your home now, and you have been more than kind in granting us the use of one of the cottages.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, nodding. “It was the least I could do. Nevertheless, I would still like to share a toast with you both, in memory of your dear father, my uncle.”

Selina was about to refuse once again, but she was interrupted by her sister.

“I think that is a splendid idea,” said Lady Alice, touching Selina lightly on her arm. “And we can also wish our good cousin luck, health and wealth in his new home while we are about it. He is, after all, doing us such a good turn.”

“Yes, yes,” said Lord Richard. “I suppose I am, rather.”

“Very well,” said Selina, remembering her manners. They led the way, for the last time, to the parlour.

Langley Cottages, Kent

The cottage, whilst the biggest of the row on the very edge of the Langley estate, was still a lot smaller than they had been accustomed to and had been empty for a long time. With the help of only a single maid and a cook, also graciously granted to them by their good and generous cousin, it had taken them days to remove all of the dust covers from the furniture and give all of the rooms a good sweeping.

The curtains in every room had been taken down and hung on the washing line in the small back yard, where they all took turns in giving them a thorough beating, swiftly followed by all the rugs that were not worn too thin to keep.

Selina had chosen the room with the biggest window and the best light for her studio, and here she carefully laid out all her brushes and her paints, her rags and her canvases, her charcoals and her papers. In the corner of the room stood an old and paint-splattered wooden easel with her current work in progress propped upon it. It was a painting of her parents, sitting happily on a bench in the grounds of the manor, the large three-storey bay window at the back of the house behind them.

Unfortunately, she had not touched the painting for months, and now it too gathered dust, just like the cottage they were living in. It still needed a lot of work before she would be happy with it.

“I really ought to finish you,” she said sadly to the canvas. “You will remind us of our home as well as our parents, all of which are now lost to us.”

The row of cottages ran alongside a small track that led back up to the main house, and Selina’s studio window looked out across fields. The houses were tied to the estate for the use of the groundsmen and labourers. However, she could not see the manor from here, which was just as well as she may feel ever more homesick if she could.

Movement outside the window caught her attention. A stable hand was astride one of the chestnut mares. He slid down from her back, loosely tied her reins to the fence, and bounded towards the front door of the cottage. By the time he rapped on the door, she was already there.

“Letter for the miss,” he said, holding out his hand. “Came on the mail coach this morning.”

“Thank you, Davey,” said Selina.

He doffed his cap, turned on his heel, and jumped back up into the saddle, loosening the horse’s reins with one hand and guiding her back towards the main house at a canter. “New master told me to be quick,” he shouted over his shoulder.

Selina watched him go in a cloud of dust before closing the door and calling out to her sister.

“Are you there, Alice?” she shouted up the stairs.

Lady Alice’s face appeared over the balustrade. “Is it a letter for me?” she asked, surprised.

“Yes, but don’t lean on that balustrade. It may collapse!” replied her sister.

Lady Alice disappeared from view and then clattered without grace down the wooden staircase.

“Who is it from?” she asked, taking the letter from Selina.

“It is from your fiancé.”

A smile broke out across Alice’s face as she looked at the man’s writing before clutching the letter to her breast. Then she galloped back up the stairs and shut herself in her room.

Selina smiled too. At least one of them was able to find happiness during this very sad time. She returned to her studio and looked at the half-finished painting of her parents, but a high-pitched wail that came from above, distracted her and turned her blood to ice.

She dashed out of the studio, up the stairs, and into her sister's room. Lady Alice was sitting on her bed, holding the letter by a corner, as though it were contaminated, a look of horror on her face.

"What is it, my dear?" asked Selina, rushing to her sister's side on the bed.

"It is Sir Benedict," said Lady Alice.

"Is he unwell?" asked Selina.

"No!" wailed Lady Alice. "He is quite well."

"Then what is it, my dear?"

"He has broken off our engagement!"

"What? Why?" said Selina, making a grab for the letter, but Lady Alice snatched it away from her hand.

"Because I do not have a dowry!"

"But I am certain that our cousin will honour our father's agreement," said Selina. "Surely, he would?"

“No,” cried Lady Alice. “That is why Sir Benedict has cancelled our arrangement. Our cousin has written to him and told him there will be no dowry.” Saying it out loud seemed to drive it home for Lady Alice, for her shocked face crumpled, and the tears began to flow. “He ... says,” she gulped, “that he ... can ... not afford to marry a ... a ... pauper. We ... are ... paupers ...” she gulped again between the tears, her eyes wide, finally handing the letter over to Selina so her sister could read it for herself.

Selina quickly scanned the words, and then she read them again.

“I did not think that our cousin could be so callous,” she said, holding back her own tears of anger. She hugged her sister and rubbed her back, and wiped the tears from her face. “Come now, sister. We will not let him upset you so. If Sir Benedict has called off the engagement, then he was marrying you for the wrong reason anyway. You are better off without him. As for our cousin —”

“He is a brute!” said Lady Alice.

“Lord Richard or Sir Benedict?” asked Selina.

“Both of them!”

“Quite right,” said Selina, pulling a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress. “Now blow your nose and stop crying. Neither of them is worth this, and you must be strong.”

Lady Alice took the handkerchief and did as she was told, honking loudly into the fine fabric. She did not return the handkerchief to her sister. Instead, she squelched it into a ball and pressed it to her eyes.

"You are right," she said, trying to be dignified. She took a deep breath and then burst out crying again.

Selina cuddled her to her and rocked her, and then she said, "Come now, tell me your favourite story. That one you always like to tell."

Lady Alice heaved twice, then took a deep breath. "You mean the one about the prince and the princess?"

"Yes," soothed Selina, smoothing down her sister's ruffled hair. "In the apple orchard."

"Very well," said Lady Alice. "Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess ..." she began as the two sisters settled onto the bed against the pillows with their arms around each other and their feet on top of the eiderdown. "The princess had everything she could ever wish for. But the princess was sad, for she was so very lonely ..."

The tears threatened to fall again, but Selina proudly watched as her sister held them in check and continued to relate the tale. They whispered together about the secret orchard that the princess stumbled upon, describing the delicate pink blossoms and the heavenly scent, and about the handsome young prince she had met there for the first time.

"... And before long, it was clear that the two of them had fallen

deeply in love," said Lady Alice.

"Did they get married and live happily ever after?" prompted her sister.

"Yes, they did. And they had lots of children."

Selina brushed at her sister's hair again with her hand. "And you too will meet your prince. We both will. Perhaps one of them will be in an apple orchard such as yours."

But Lady Alice did not reply. She had cried herself to sleep and was now softly snoring.

Want to read the rest of the story? Check out the book on Amazon!

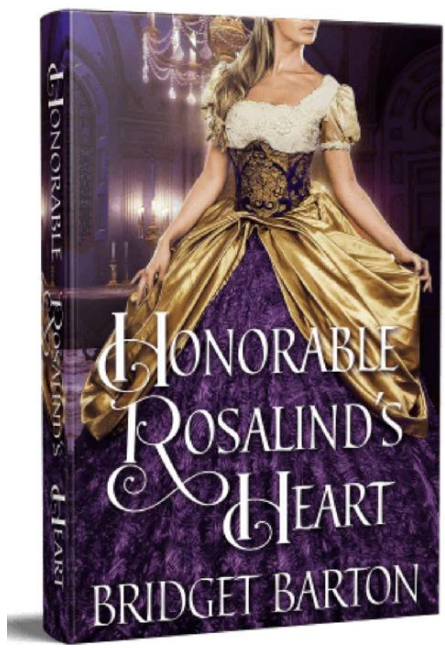
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[AJ1]Part 3 starts here